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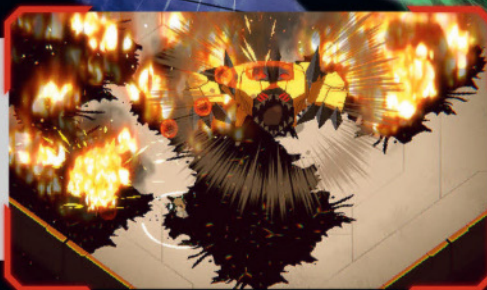
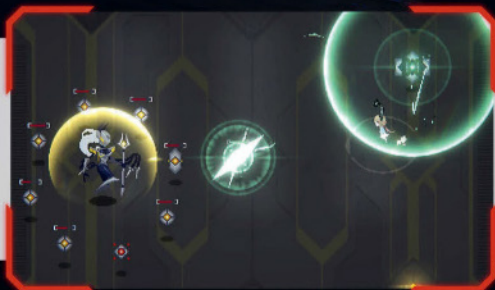


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#415 DECEMBER 2025

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"THE MOST DRAMATIC ALL-OUT WARFARE FPS WE'VE EVER SEEN"

**ROBERT JONES**Twitter
@RNicholasJ**This month**

Was approached by EA to be the model for a secret new class in *Battlefield 6*. After accepting a huge remuneration package in Greggs gift vouchers, he agreed. Turn to page 130 for an exclusive preview.

However, after getting world-exclusive insider access to *Battlefield 6*, which is the most dramatic all-out warfare FPS we've ever seen, it sure looks like those dark days are well and truly behind us. *Battlefield's* officially back!

ROBERT JONES
PRINT EDITOR

robert.jones@futurenet.com

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The PC Gamer team

**TED LITCHFIELD**
Bluesky

@dildpatrol.bsky.social

This month

Assembled a squad of garden gnomes and ventured forth to win everlasting glory.

**JODY MACGREGOR**
Twitter

@jodymacgregor

This month

Worked alongside a bunch of weirdos wearing scanty outfits. Oh, and in *Promise Mascot Agency* he...

**ROBIN VALENTINE**
Bluesky

@robinvalentine

This month

Rode an animatronic velociraptor around the office while demanding tribute in Tangfastics.

**IAN EVENDEN**
Bluesky

@ieunden.wtf

This month

Set up a craft brewery in the PC Gamer Towers basement. It's name? The Outer Milds.

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MONITOR

NEWS | OPINION | DEVELOPMENT



Then again, it's not like CoD resisted going back to Russian baddies for long.

NO RUSSIANS

CALL OF DUTY's director ditched enemy nations so he could visit without bodyguards

Call of Duty has been around the block a few times, and across the years it's turned a lot of the world's countries into videogame enemies. In contemporary or near-future games, though, that can be problematic, as former *Call of Duty* director Glen Schofield realised when he was promoting the first incarnation of *Modern Warfare 3*.

"I was doing 30 days of press for *Modern Warfare 3*," he tells us during a wide-ranging chat about his history with the series. "I'm all over the world, and the last stop is in the UK,

and I'm having dinner with some journalists from the UK and I get a call. They say, 'We need you to go to Russia tomorrow and do some more press'. And by then, I was really tired. I'm like, 'Do you know who the enemies are in *Modern Warfare 3*?' They're like, 'Don't worry, we'll have a bodyguard with you.' And I'm like,

'I don't feel any better.' And so I was a little worried about that aspect. And so I didn't go."

DISCOMFORT

That discomfort led to Schofield making a decision right there and then. "I came back to the journalists. I was sat down having dinner with them, and I said, 'OK, you know what, my next game is not going to have a country as the enemy. Because I want to go to those countries'. I didn't know what I was going to do, but I had said it out loud, and I'm like, 'Yeah, I'm going to do that, because I don't want to have this problem any more'. And

**A CORPORATE
MEGALOMANIAC
AND PMCS BECAME
THE VILLAINS**

PINBALL WIZARD

SPEED BALL



You remember that pinball game in Windows, with the little space cadet guy? According to its programmer, Dave Plummer, it had a bug that would see it run as fast as possible. On anything modern, it would run “at, like, 5,000 frames per second”. ■ **JR**

RECHARGE

LOST MY MIND



REPO's upcoming update will add the ability to speak to your buddies or distract any monsters threatening your friends even after you've lost your head. Be warned though, your spare battery depletes quickly, so your cry for help or leap of faith will need to be short and sweet. ■ **KP**



PT PLZ

KAMIYA THROWS DOWN



We all wish we could've seen more *PT* – Hideo Kojima's *Silent Hills* project that died when he split up with Konami. That includes *Bayonetta* director Hideki Kamiya, who said if Kojima never gets to make a follow-up to his 'Playable Teaser,' “maybe I'll do it myself”. ■ **JW**



TOP: *Advanced Warfare* ditched nation states for PMCs.

ABOVE: Schofield was worried foreign countries might take issue with being cast as the bad guys.

that's how the PMC started. I started thinking about private military companies.”

So a corporate megalomaniac and PMCs became *Advanced Warfare*'s villains. Which is safer. Nobody really likes them. But this decision wasn't solely born out of a desire to visit foreign countries without the need for private security. Schofield was also reckoning with jingoism, colonialism and American interventionism – things that have been historically presented without much criticism in big American action games.

BROKEN COUNTRY

“I got an MBA, I was doing that at nights, and one of my cohort was from another country, Iraq,” he recalls. “And she and her family had to escape, and they did. Their uncle had been arrested by Saddam Hussein,” but was let go. “And they asked the uncle, ‘Do you want to escape with us? We're going to go someplace with democracy’. And he said, ‘Democracy? I don't need democracy. They show up and they do their thing, and then they leave, and we got a broken country. I got everything I want here.’”

This stuck with Schofield, to the extent that he made it the basis for a speech given by *Advanced Warfare*'s villainous CEO Jonathan Irons. ■

Fraser Brown

Highs & Lows



HIGHS

Todd forbid

The Lusty Argonian Maid only got into *Elder Scrolls* because its writer snuck it past Todd Howard.

Culture culture

Witcher creator Andrzej Sapkowski got a gold Polish culture medal.

Phar bigger

A *Silksong* gumshoe pixel-counted both games to compare the size of their worlds, and Pharloom looks twice as big as Hallownest.

Not proud

RuneScape boss says he killed new Pride events to keep things going “as apolitically as possible”.

Ninten(please)don't

A videogame IP lawyer says Nintendo's latest patents on *Pokémon* mechanics “should not have happened, full stop”.

Zhongwen bu hao

Silksong sank to ‘mostly negative’ Steam review status among Chinese gamers over its poor translation.

LOWS



The Spy

■ BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

Over the past 30 years, The Spy has lived following the mantra that, yes, it's better down where it's wetter. This explains

why The Spy is a fan of hot tubs, ramen and any videogame where there are large bodies of water to look at and dive into. The Spy is talking about the *Outcast*, *Horizon Forbidden West*, *Sea of Thieves* and *Subnautica* experiences of the videogame world.

So it was incredibly disappointing to discover on a recent diving trip that the much-wanted *Subnautica 2* had fallen into a whirlpool of delay and, potentially, doom. While scubering past Unknown Worlds Entertainment's development studio in the San Francisco Bay, The Spy saw Krafton executives delivering marching orders to studio founders, Charlie Cleveland and Max McGuire, as well as the studio's CEO, Ted Gill.

RELEASE THE KRAFTON

Wanting to know the reason for such a dramatic turn of events, upon returning to dry land The Spy immediately put out feelers in the underground PC gaming intelligence network to find out just what was going on. And what was going on was messy. According to Krafton, the trio of game makers were let go because of "repeated confusion in direction and significant delays in the overall project schedule," as well as an "absence of core leadership", with Krafton stating that the trio "abandoned the responsibilities entrusted to them". *Subnautica 2*'s launch was then delayed by Krafton from 2025 until 2026.

After Krafton's explanation for the dismissal, The Spy was forwarded an advance copy of a lawsuit that the trio of game makers was filing against Krafton, which effectively accused the publisher of sabotaging the game in an effort to avoid paying a \$250 million "earnout" bonus, and when that failed the publisher forcibly seized control of the company. According to the lawsuit, if *Subnautica 2* launched in 2025, then it "would likely trigger the \$250 million earnout to the studio's former owners and employees".

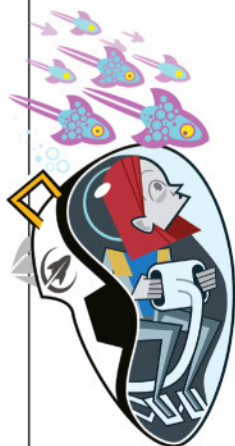
Krafton, however, then fired back at the trio, releasing a statement that said they were fired with cause to keep

them from "permanently damaging Unknown Worlds' most valuable IP". "Having sold the company," the statement reads, "Cleveland and McGuire, who pocketed almost \$200 million apiece from the sale, and Gill, who received \$60 million, quickly lost interest in developing *Subnautica 2*," actions that, according to Krafton, had left the game in an unfit state to launch, hence their removal and the game's delay into 2026.

Where the truth lies in this mess remains, right now, unknown to The Spy. Did the leadership team go AWOL? Did Krafton sabotage the release of the game in 2025 to avoid paying out hundreds of millions of dollars in earnout compensation? Was *Subnautica 2* going to launch in such a poor condition that it would jeopardise the entire franchise? These

are questions that should be answered but, outside of the courts, now seem like they never will be. One thing is for sure, though, while Krafton and the former Unknown Worlds leadership trio try to plunge each other down into watery graves, it sure looks like gamers aren't going to be enjoying life under the sea for a good while yet. Spy out. ■

The Spy



THE SPY
The Spy is a calypso expert, regularly playing steel drums with Sebastian the crab.

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Special Report

PCG INVESTIGATES



MATTER OF TIMING

SILKSONG highlights the difficulty of picking a release date and the risks in delays

Hollow Knight: *Silksong* isn't *Grand Theft Auto VI*, but the number of games that scurried away from its September 4 release date, announced as a surprise just two weeks ahead of time, gave it the air of a game nothing could compete with. But what does competing mean when the game in question is a 2D platformer sequel with a cult-like following?

Of the delayed games, you can easily see why a *Metroidvania* sequel like *Aeterna Lucis* would be sweating. But what about the games that are less obviously aimed at the same exact players? Shouldn't they be fine even if *Silksong*'s a mega hit, considering there are more PC gamers than ever?

"You can go to the likes of GameDiscoverCo and look at data for past high-performing titles with similar release dates until your corneas crumple to try and discern the material effects of 'audience overlap,'" says Brian Kwek, the head of tactical RPG *Demonschool*'s indie publisher Ysbryd Games. *Demonschool* was delayed to November 19 to give it a better shot at success.

"With *Demonschool* and *Silksong* both being multi-platform simultaneous releases, we have to consider more than 'just' the Steam algorithm, so this ultimately requires us to consider the impact of *Silksong* on the

console gamer audience and how they're hearing about games like *Demonschool* through broader coverage from content creators and press," Kwek says. Streamers are a key avenue for indie games like *Demonschool* to get noticed, and as with other Ysbryd-published games such as *World of Horror*, it's more likely to be played by 'variety' streamers who bounce between games. And those streamers are likely to be focused on the higher-profile game during its launch week.

"Even if it's just a week, that's a week that *Demonschool* – or any game still holding on to the September 3/4 release date – would have been cut off from building its own critical mass of discourse about their own game. I think that can be fatal in this saturated market, where every game has to fight and use whatever edge they've got available to stay visible."

Ysbryd and *Demonschool* developer Necrosoft Games' original choice of September 3 was based on careful consideration of more than just competing games: it followed the news deluge of Gamescom and PAX West in late August, but predated a busy October including one of Steam's demo festivals. Despite Steam Next Fest being a prime opportunity for developers to get eyeballs on their upcoming games, it can be "a black hole of visibility for game launches that is maybe almost as deadly, if not more deadly, than launching next to *Silksong*".



Follow knight

Silksong was announced in February 2019. After appearing in Edge in December 2020, silence ensued until April 2022, when Team Cherry said "it can't be too much longer, surely!" Xbox then said it'd arrive within 12 months. In May 2023, Team Cherry broke the bad news: nope. That was it til 2025, when Nintendo declared it was coming soon; Team Cherry finally dropped the date on August 21.



FAR LEFT: This boss is really excited about *Silksong*'s release date.

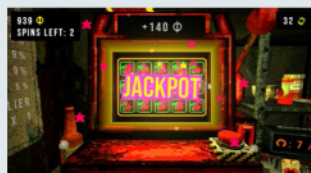
LEFT: A tempting strategy indeed.

MOVING TARGETS *Four games that moved their release date after Silksong's surprise announcement*



BABY STEPS

Bennett Foddy's *Getting Over It* successor gave its "unemployed failson" a two-week reprieve from falling down.



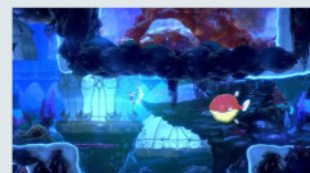
CLOVERPIT

The "roguelite slot machine nightmare" was meant to release September 3, but jumped to September 26.



LITTLE WITCH IN THE WOODS

This cutesy life sim was leaving early access on September 4, but delayed 11 days "given its immense influence".



AETERNA LUCIS

The indie Metroidvania sequel hoped to land in September, but decided to move to next year instead.

Publishers like Ysbryd know that delays come with their own downsides, though, including disappointing or angering players who have had their expectations upended; those reactions made him "miserable". There's also a load of stress that comes with reaching out to partners like PlayStation, Nintendo and Xbox to see if a last-minute delay is even feasible.

Any time a game with a previously announced release date is delayed, you can bet loads of hand-wringing went into the decision, says Adam Lieb, the founder and CEO of game marketing platform Gamesight.

"When I see backlash, I'm like, [the studio] sat in a room and sweated about this for two weeks," he says. "This is a really important decision, could be the difference between success and failure, and oftentimes it's a really expensive decision. I think that's one thing that often isn't considered by, like, Reddit: you build a game to launch on a certain date, and build to how much it costs to make that game. When I delay a game a month, I have to pay that entire team a whole extra month with zero revenue coming in the door. That's really fucking expensive."

And the bigger the game, the costlier the move: triple-A games that buy TV commercial slots or billboards in advance have to pay a fee to move those ads or even forfeit the money altogether. But there is one more layer to the release-date-delay-decision-making dance, and that's the potential benefit from launching in the afterglow of a big, eyeball-drawing launch.

WELL-KNOWN PHENOMENON

"It's a pretty well-known phenomenon that when the biggest games of the year launch on Steam everyone makes more money," Lieb says. "There are just more people on Steam in that window; that's eyeballs on your stuff, on all the algorithmic ranking pages, people in the desktop app, which can lead to more sales."

To use a crude blast zone analogy, once you're outside the 'ground zero' radius of a game like *Silksong* landing, a game going after the same target audience could stand the benefit from its impact. "You're getting people who are in the mood for this one thing... when *Oblivion Remastered* came out and *Expedition 33* came out, you could say 'Oblivion's so huge, nobody's going to play this other game' – I played them both basically at the same time... *Oblivion* definitely is what got me in an RPG mood, and I stayed in that RPG mood."

Launching a game at just the right time seems like it's about as easy as landing a space shuttle in a driveway while wearing oven mitts. Even when you do your best to plan ahead, there's always a chance things will go comically wrong. Ysbryd and Necrosoft actually did try to account for the possibility of a *Silksong* surprise launch at Gamescom or a release date announcement, but figured the latter would be at least a month out.

"In this situation, it's impossible to know what the 'right' answer is," Kwek says. "I just pray that we are able to do our best to get eyes onto *Demonschool* with the audiences who'll dig it!" ■

Wes Fenlon

PUBLISHERS LIKE YSBRYD KNOW THAT DELAYS COME WITH DOWNSIDES

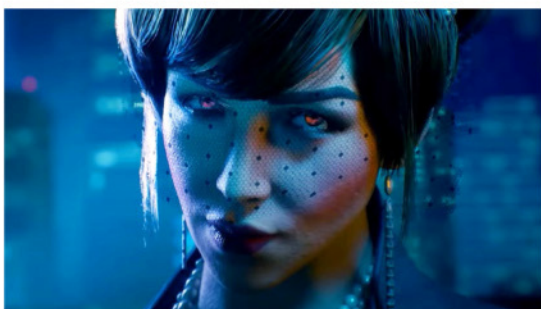
1 month



BATTLEFIELD 6

RELEASE October 10, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Battlefield Studios

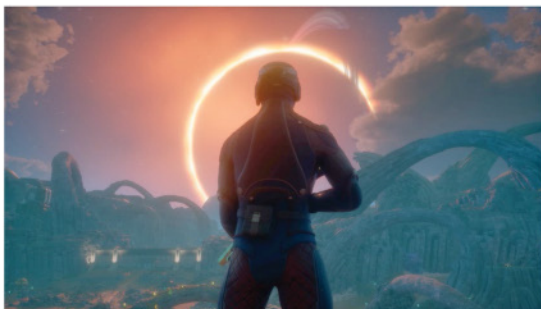
Multiplayer and singleplayer FPS action returns in the new all-out warfare experience. Drive tanks, fly planes and helicopters, as well as shoot on foot with your squad.



VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE – BLOODLINES 2

RELEASE October 2025 | **DEVELOPER** The Chinese Room

Fight your way through a modern-day Seattle on the brink of an open war as an elder vampire. The long-awaited first-person World of Darkness RPG is almost here. Hype!



THE OUTER WORLDS 2

RELEASE October 29, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Obsidian Entertainment

Further interplanetary action and adventure from Obsidian, with both a revolution and an invasion taking place in a galaxy that reacts to your decisions.

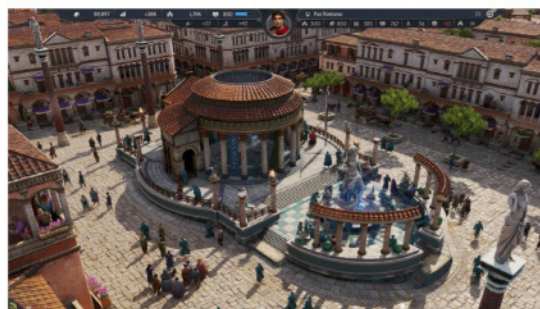
2 months



EUROPA UNIVERSALIS V

RELEASE November 4, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Paradox Tinto

Paradox Interactive's flagship historical grand strategy game returns. Use war, trade or diplomacy to satisfy your grandest ambitions and dominate five centuries of history.



ANNO 117: PAX ROMANA

RELEASE November 13, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Ubisoft Mainz

The latest entry in the long-running *Anno* series promises to let gamers shape the Roman Empire in their image, be that via strong economic growth or bloody warfare.



CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS 7

RELEASE November 14, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Treyarch, Raven Software

Robots, zombies and guns, lots of guns. The latest co-op and multiplayer shooter promises to be the most mind-bending *Black Ops* ever.

3 months



SUBNAUTICA 2

RELEASE 2026 | DEVELOPER Unknown Worlds Entertainment

An open-water survival game in which you must craft vehicles, tools and bases to survive on a mysterious alien world. This is looking like a total treat.



007 FIRST LIGHT

RELEASE 2026 | DEVELOPER IO Interactive

Step into the shoes of James Bond before he attained his 00 status. From the makers of *Hitman*, this third-person action-adventure game promises espionage and quips.

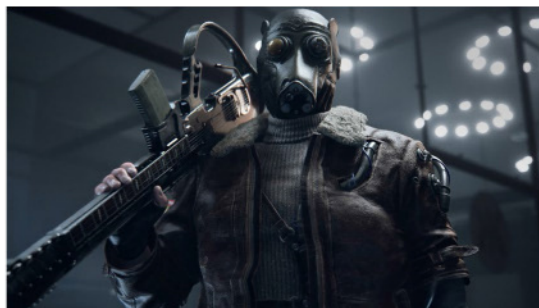


ONIMUSHA: WAY OF THE SWORD

RELEASE 2026 | DEVELOPER Capcom

Wield a variety of deadly weapons as famous sword master Miyamoto Musashi. Incredibly visceral and kinetic combat is promised as Musashi fights through Edo-era Kyoto.

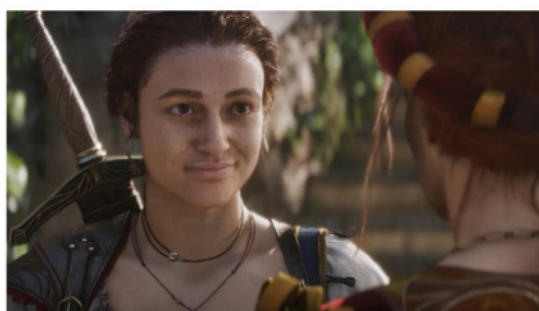
4 months+



ATOMIC HEART 2

RELEASE TBC | DEVELOPER Mundfish

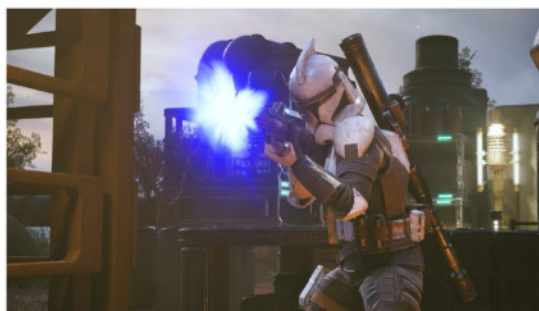
The bonkers Soviet Union-themed *BioShock*-like returns for more violence. If you're a sucker for dystopia and retrofuturism then this is one to keep an eye on.



FABLE

RELEASE 2026 | DEVELOPER Playground Games

A reboot of the old action-RPG series originally crafted by Peter Molyneux's Lionhead Studios, *Fable* promises a visually spectacular return to the fantasy world of Albion.



STAR WARS ZERO COMPANY

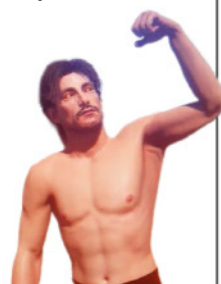
RELEASE TBC | DEVELOPER Bit Reactor

What happens if you take the turn-based combat system from *XCOM* and smash it together with the Star Wars universe? *Zero Company* is what happens.

MOD

BOOGIE KNIGHTS

Wants to take a well-earned break from crushing 10,000 Mudcrabs in *Oblivion Remastered*? Well, why not strip off that armour and boogie your blues away with CosmicBoogaloo's excellent *Dance and Emote Animation Pack*? Grab it here: tinyurl.com/4hasuf36





Hell Let Loose: Vietnam

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2026DEVELOPER
Expression GamesPUBLISHER
Team17LINK
hellletloose.comHELL LET
LOOSE: VIETNAM

The 'light military simulation' game ships out to Vietnam, 1965

Having toiled in the trenches of World War II, Expression Games is going airborne with *Hell Let Loose: Vietnam*, a robust, baffling and thrilling multiplayer shooter with an intimidating learning curve. It shares its toughness, historical nuance and team gameplay with its predecessor. But this time, one side has helicopters.

The extravagant 50 versus 50 battles of *Hell Let Loose: Vietnam* unfold over sprawling maps and embrace six game modes, including the original's objective-based Offensive mode and Warfare, which is a grand tug-of-war for control of strongpoints. The twist here is the asymmetry. The original game's fairly matched teams have been bent out of shape. Instead, players opt for the technologically advanced United States forces, or the North Vietnamese Army who deploy tunnels to help them manoeuvre in stealth.

At first glance the game bears resemblance to Antimatter Games' *Rising Storm 2*. However, that game released back in 2017, leaving the setting underrepresented among FPS games and giving Expression's community good reason to ask for another. And with boots on the ground, it's clear that *Hell Let Loose: Vietnam* occupies its own niche between military simulation and popular shooters. "We're like a middle ground," says lead producer Craig Clark. "We're a light military simulation game and I think we know what we're doing in this realm."

PLAYED
IT

What continues to distinguish it from other first-person shooters is how it harnesses communication and teamwork. "That's the big thing," says Clark. "You can't solo this game. You can't be *the guy*."

NOT ANY FPS

From the gunner seat on a UH-1 Huey helicopter I'm given a fly-over of one of the six launch maps, before setting down as Expression Games' workforce joins in to set it aflame. The map is one of abandoned hamlets linked by dirt tracks, intertwined rivers which run to the coast, and jungle giving way for rice paddies.

Seeking to order the chaos is my squad leader, Kieran D'Archambaud, technical director at Expression Games. He sets up an 'outpost' spawn close to the action and attempts to marshal a defence of the central strongpoint against, as it transpires, overwhelming odds.

"It's not just a first-person shooter," D'Archambaud later explains, once I have retrieved my wits from the carnage. With 19 different roles, there are many levers to pull in this war machine, from tank driver or sniper's spotter to helicopter crewman.

Where other games are "relatively arcadey", these roles are specialised and deliberate, from dealing with a tank's manual transmission to slowly reloading its cannon.

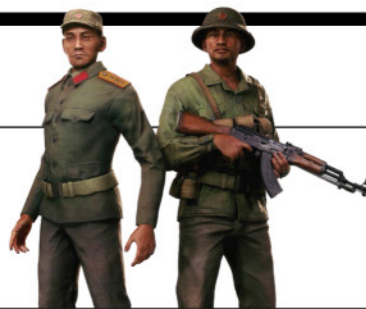
DUST OFF

One such area new for *Hell Let Loose* are the helicopters which prowl the aerospace like vultures. The helicopter is resupply, fire support and transport. Flares can be fired onto the battlefield to mark enemy positions to squads on the ground. There was no question of helicopters taking centre stage. "When you see one of those things flying over, you can hear it coming," says Clark. "And you feel like the hero. You're running, you see a helicopter flying over, bombs going off everywhere, I think it's just really atmospheric."

"One of my favourite things," adds D'Archambaud, "is calling in through the chain of command saying, can we get a transport chopper to basically take us all the way forward into enemy territory."

For existing players, there is more to be excited about. Mortar squads introduce mobile artillery weapons, which rely on spotters who can feed back information

ON A UH-1 HUEY HELICOPTER
I'M GIVEN A FLY-OVER OF ONE
OF THE SIX LAUNCH MAPS

Hell Let Loose: Vietnam

➤ on the enemy. PBRs, patrol boats with machine guns fore and aft, wind along waterways, spritzing bullets into the reeds and functioning as mobile spawns.

Some new gadgets introduce measured asymmetry to the game. As D'Archambaud explains, this gives players "a toolbox of cool stuff and letting them figure it out. I can't wait to see the different ways that the community chooses to use tunnels, helicopters, boats, everything that's going on in there in ways that we haven't thought about yet".

The prevalence of automatic M16s and AK-47s may accelerate the otherwise cautious, bolt-action gameplay of the original, but D'Archambaud offers assurance that it does not compromise its essence. "If you play *Hell Let Loose*, you need to be able to come across to Vietnam and it's fundamentally the same core of what you're used to."

WAYS TO DIE

Certainly, there are more ways to die. The tension of traversing the map remains, as does the satisfaction of a kill – and the sense of hopelessness when you are bleeding out without a medic nearby.

This is a game where your squad can wander into an ambush and get wiped out without ever seeing the attacker. Where a fully crewed tank can roll up beside you, leaving you no choice but to attempt to outrun its shells which separate bodies into parts with chilling precision.

With some action under my belt, I crawl my way back into the perimeter of the central strong point with an M60 machine gun. I shoot up the windows, the low walls and the fields from which my team was recently expelled. The effect of the suppression is a momentary hush. Then a gauntlet of fire pricks at the air around my head before finding me.

For the uninitiated the frustration of quick deaths and long respawn times will no doubt cause some to bounce from the game. To help mitigate this, and to encourage players to tune into *Hell Let Loose*'s particular frequency, Expression says it has invested in a proper onboarding experience with tutorials on the game's main features. "Particularly if you're new to the game, it can be very

hard to understand where you're dying from," says D'Archambaud. To address this they are adding foliage movement, which means plants will telegraph your position if you are not careful.

BY THE BOOK

Historical authenticity is also high on the agenda. The team recorded weapons firing at the Royal Armouries, gathering precise data for audio and animation. At least one artist is an expert in foliage while an audio engineer is devoted to the game's ambient sound. "All the uniforms or the weaponry, the environment, everything from the clothes you see on the floors, the sound of the bugs, the sound of the frogs, all of it is a hundred percent historically authentic," says creative director Matt White, to whom every important decision on history is yielded. "

While the way they make maps is the same as with the original, starting with real-world scans and heightmap data, the ambitions for *Vietnam*'s maps differ slightly. "With World War II, you know exactly where the battles took place," says White. It's harder to pin down the location for jungle battles. "So instead for us it's more about making sure the maps are authentic to the Vietnam environment, but picking the best location within the vicinity for gameplay purposes."

Expression Games is about 120 people, most of whom work on *Hell Let Loose*. When it took over the franchise's development in 2023 from original creators Black Matter, it inherited a list of top-requested bug fixes, some of which weren't possible to address given the state of the technology. *Vietnam*, by contrast, is developed in Unreal Engine 5.

It claims this helps it eliminate hangover issues, but also has production benefits including its procedural technology – useful for filling a jungle with foliage – and performance benefits like improved streaming technology. Nonetheless D'Archambaud as technical director is cautious about which of the engine's bells and whistles to use in the interest of maintaining performance. At times during my sessions, when the enemies mounted and the napalm dropped, the preview build noticeably faltered on the demo PC.

I only had one hour to marvel at what Expression Games are introducing to the franchise, and what I saw makes me look forward to taking another helicopter ride when *Hell Let Loose: Vietnam* launches.

Kyle Hoekstra



EXPRESSION SAYS IT HAS INVESTED IN A PROPER ONBOARDING EXPERIENCE



ABOVE: The dense jungle foliage is totally new for *Hell Let Loose*.

LEFT: Should probably find some cover.

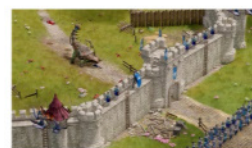




ABOVE: There are a large number of dinos on display.

RIGHT: Troops have surprisingly smart AI, with them perfectly capable of battling enemies without micro-management.





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBCDEVELOPER
NorthplayPUBLISHER
Ghost Ship PublishingLINK
steam.pm/app/2587620

DINOLORDS

Action RPG combat and RTS battles with dinosaurs? Hell yes!

Despite its gimmicky-sounding premise, *Dinolords* is packed with surprises as delightful as its trailer's reveal of a viking riding a T-rex. It's also mechanically a much more creative and interesting game than you're likely expecting. Despite appearances, it's as much an action RPG as it is an RTS. That's an unusual hybrid – I'd struggle to name other examples past *Brütal Legend* – and a lot of what *Dinolords* does to blend the two genres feels new.

Your perspective is locked to your character – an English lord equipped with a sword, a bow, a few special abilities and, of course, a velociraptor mount. You can pop out into a wider view to manage construction more easily or direct troops more finely, but you can't move the camera away from your hero, so they always need to be in the heart of the action.

You can get strategic, moving different soldier types around the battlefield while you fight, but it's easy to keep it simple. A hotkey press lets you simply gather all soldiers in an area and get them following you, and from there they've got rather more AI than your average RTS troops – they're perfectly capable of battling enemies without micro-management.

That can free you up to focus on getting the most out of your hero – getting hits in on key targets, dodge-rolling out of the way of enemy attacks and using powers like a dramatic charge attack and a handy superhero leap that ends in a ground slam. Deal enough damage to a

major enemy, and you can perform an execution to finish them off, which also heals all your minions in the area – a neat bit of synergy between the two genres.

DINO DELIGHT

Consistently, there are dinosaur delights. Far more than just another class of units to recruit, dinos are baked right into the game's DNA, and even just in 30 minutes I felt like I was constantly experiencing child-like joy at finding some new way they click into the formula. Jumping onto a velociraptor steed lets me speed between different settlements and battlefronts. Then I'm hunting for nests in the forest so I can steal the giant eggs and use them to recruit new dino species. As I set up my base, I'm enchanted to see that the lumber mill sends out a specially trained Triceratops to uproot the trees and carry them back for sawing into logs.

I'm advised that it'd be a good idea to set up a couple of sentry towers before the vikings arrive, and surprise! They're actually Pteranodon roosts, so instead of doing something boring like shooting arrows at invaders, they send out giant

lizard-birds to grab them, fly them up into the air, and drop them screaming back to the ground. When the vikings arrive, each wave presents its own dino-problem in need of solving – from burrowing 'mudbacks' who can tunnel under my walls to ankylosaurus battering rams with sweeping AoE tail attacks to dodge through.

They're like toys come to life, and the result is a game that has the joyful enthusiasm of a kid bashing all their action figures together. During my session I felt like I could hear a running narration from my eight-year-old self: "This is the heroic knight and he's arrived to save the day and then an evil T-rex appears and roars at him and then he has to do a BIG leap off the castle walls to fight it!!!"

I was accompanied for my playthrough by three of the game's developers, and it couldn't have been more obvious how psyched they are for that journey. I can say pretty confidently that I've never met three grown men more thrilled to talk to me about dinosaurs, and even at this early stage, it's that infectious enthusiasm that suffuses *Dinolords'* DNA.

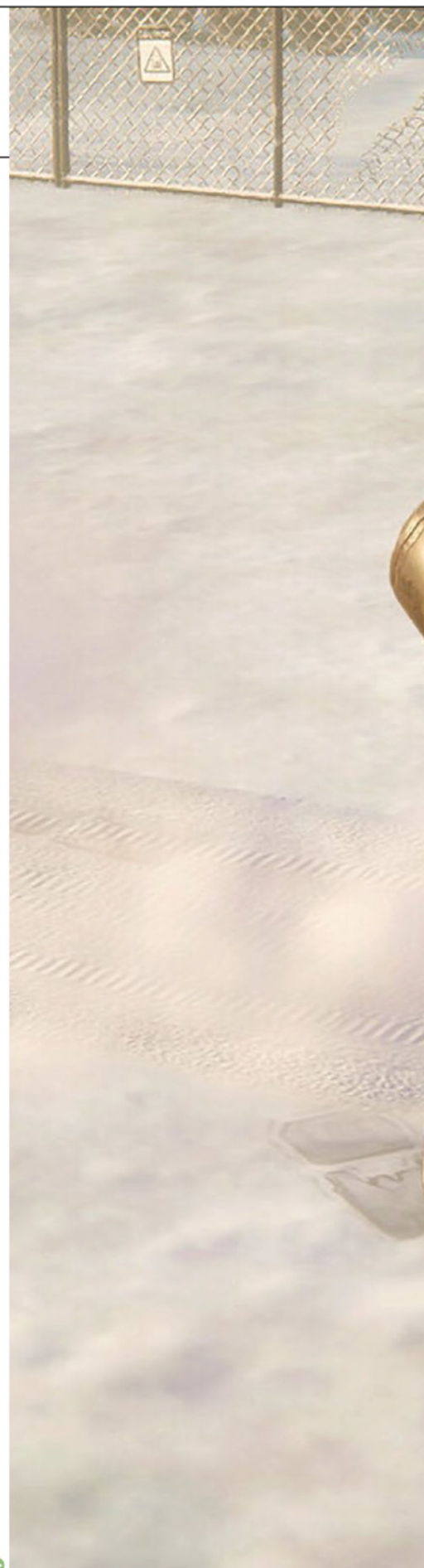
Robin Valentine

PLAYED
IT

Conquering castles. Easier with dinos.

I'M HUNTING FOR NESTS IN THE FOREST SO I CAN STEAL THE GIANT EGGS

Menace



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBC

DEVELOPER
Overhype Studios

PUBLISHER
Hooded Horse

LINK
steam.pm/app/2432860

MENACE

The most exciting turn-based strategy game of 2025

Whe first time I played developer Overhype Studio's first game, the ruthless *Battle Brothers*, my plucky crew of medieval soldiers got immediately beaten to death by bandits while trying to complete the easiest mercenary contract I could find. I was hooked. Not because I'm a masochist, mind, but because the depth of the game's turn-based strategy simulation was immediately compelling.

So when it was revealed back in 2023 that the studio was working on an even bigger, more ambitious sandbox as a follow-up, I knew it was one to watch. The intimidatingly-titled *Menace* has been top of the list of my most anticipated turn-based strategy games ever since – and now that I've gotten to play 30 minutes of it, I'm even more impatient to get it on my hard drive.

Set in a violent sci-fi future, the game casts you as a military commander cut off from the chain of command in the lawless Wayback system. Pulling together whatever soldiers, mercenaries, criminals and deserters you can into a makeshift force, you have to pacify dangerous pirates, deal with local factions, and take on the eponymous Menace – a mysterious and inhuman threat.

MISSION CRITICAL

Thrown into a mission to capture and hold two buildings on a desert planet, I'm surprised to find that the action feels like a collision of *Jagged Alliance* with the tabletop game *Warhammer 40,000*.

PLAYED
IT

The former inspires the game's chaotic combat simulation, combining the explosive fun of an '80s action movie with an eye for detail that sees the path of every bullet tracked from gun to target. And like *Jagged Alliance*, your team consists of authored characters – named heroes with their own backstories – rather than the purely procedurally-generated minions of *Battle Brothers*.

But as I'm building my squad with a limited pool of points and dropping them into a deployment zone on the map, it's afternoons rolling dice across a battle mat that I'm most reminded of. Those named heroes each lead their own team of grunts, who copy their armour and equipment, and like a classic *Warhammer 40,000* squad, can be assigned one special weapon, such as a rocket launcher or a flamethrower.

It's no accident. As I play, I'm guided by developer Jan Taak (managing director at Overhype) and his brother Paul Taak (creative director), and as we talk about the studio's ambitions for *Menace*, their love of tabletop gaming is a recurring topic. "We are big *Warhammer* fans," says Jan.

"I really love the army-building, theorycrafting, thinking about what item to give to what character. And this is something that you really find in *Menace* as well. Especially as you get later into the game, you have so many items, so many options, that each player would be able to build basically their own army and see their tactics come to life."

As I move my forces up to capture the objectives, I'm a little overwhelmed by my own strike force. All those tactical choices in the set-up phase have left me with a wide array of tools at my disposal. Each squad has its own specialities and abilities, and the specifics of its equipment can make a huge difference. It's that detail I loved in *Battle Brothers*, but on a different scale. Instead of worrying about a flail wrapping over a peasant's shield, I'm working out the best position for a unit of snipers to lay down covering fire, while another squad seeks the optimal range to deploy its flamethrower.

SIM CITY

The more I play, the more the simulation kicks up little surprises and discoveries. Shooting at an armoured personnel

I'M THROWN INTO A MISSION TO CAPTURE TWO BUILDINGS ON A DESERT PLANET



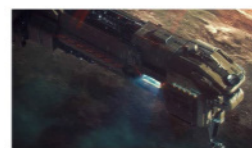
PREVIEW

Menace

RIGHT: Catch enemies in crossfire and their morale will plunge.

BELOW: Combat is a cross between an '80s action movie and a serious war sim.





carrier, I realise the angle of my attack determines which part I'm likely to hit – flanking it allows me to catch it in the rear armour, and make my next discovery, which is that damaged vehicles have a chance to explode in a glorious fireball.

Enemies scamper around in the fog of war, hidden from my forces unless I can secure vital sightlines. While most of them seem to be simply preparing to ambush, one has a grenade launcher, allowing them to send explosives arcing out of their hiding place and into my lines.

The Taaks point out, however, that I have the ability to deploy airstrikes – making an educated guess as to where my foes are hiding, I call one in. The resulting blaze misses them all, of course, but it drifts enough to accidentally hit part of the structure they're hiding behind.

It reveals a particularly well-equipped unit of pirates, but from their newly exposed position, I'm able to catch them in the crossfire between two units and whittle down their morale, forcing them to dive to the dirt, pinned. With them occupied, I'm able to safely move up my own heavy vehicle without fear of their anti-tank weaponry, while a close-range team moves up behind it using it as cover.

With a bit of luck and a dash of guidance from the developers, the mission finishes out surprisingly smoothly – and even when things do go wrong, the consequences aren't quite as harsh as my first outing in *Battle Brothers*. But despite being named characters, my heroes can still permanently die – the grunts in their squads effectively act as HP, and if they're all wiped out the leader is vulnerable to being killed – which keeps the tension high and my choice of actions weighty.

BROTHERS IN ARMS

It's a wonderfully layered turn-based strategy challenge, with alternating unit activations adding an extra level of tactical considerations as my enemy regularly reacts to me with its own tactical plays. It's detailed but not dry, revelling in the drama and chaos that a really robust simulation can generate.

"As the designers, we put up a challenge for you, but we don't design the solution for this challenge. It's up to you,"

says Paul. "We give you a toolbox and say, 'Now come up with a solution.' This is what we love about this type of game." And all of it was procedurally-generated and open for me to approach however I chose. "Replayability is our number one thing," says Jan. "So all the battle maps, the missions, the mission rewards, the operations, the enemy compositions, what you're getting in terms of equipment, all of that is procedural."

That one mission is part of a small series of missions making up an operation, and all of that is just one thing I could end up doing in a whole sprawling sandbox that makes up the game's setting, the Wayback System. As its 'space sheriff' you're free to handle the various factions however you choose.

Cut off as you are, you're reliant on the locals to help you gain new supplies, recruit new soldiers, and upgrade your spaceship – and that forces tough choices, as calls for help and offers of work can time out if you go for one over another. Over time, your trust level with the various groups will grow stronger or fracture, as your team of heroes builds in power and even develops relationships amongst themselves.

This wider layer is the part I didn't get to see for myself, but the promise of it is enticing. It sounds like the kind of sandbox I love – wide open for you to make your own choices, and primed to kick up emergent stories of peril. But that doesn't mean it's directionless.

"So the story is, of course, about the *Menace* and how it comes into the system, and how people react to it, and what you can do to stop it," says Jan. "Once the *Menace* is defeated, if you manage to do it, the game is officially over... but at the same time, we try to keep these story beats as minimal and as not invasive as possible, because we don't want players to think, 'Oh, I have to do this again and it is the exact same mission.' We want it to be as procedural as possible, while giving some structure and some guidance to the whole thing."

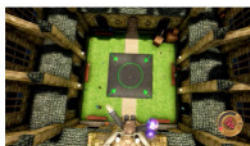
All together it's a hell of a pitch, and the slice I'm able to play gives me confidence that it's all heading in the right direction. The shift in setting is appropriate to the step Overhype is taking here – as we go from ordering around a handful of thugs across a chunk of fantasy Europe in *Battle Brothers* to trying to wrangle an entire star system with a small army in *Menace*, the ambitions have risen to match.

Robin Valentine

DESPITE BEING NAMED CHARACTERS, MY HEROES CAN STILL PERMANENTLY DIE



Secret Agent Wizard Boy and the International Crime Syndicate



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE

Out now (Early Access)

DEVELOPER

John Szymanski

PUBLISHER

David Szymanski

LINK

steam.pm/app/3111080

SECRET AGENT WIZARD BOY AND THE INTERNATIONAL CRIME SYNDICATE

A promising young sorcerer receives a letter from MI6

A fellow student of wizarding school stands beneath the arches of the quadrangle, looking out onto an immaculate lawn. “Everyone’s always getting crunched around here,” he confides breathlessly, in the earnest tone of an Enid Blyton character. “Whenever I get crunched, I end up having to spend the rest of the week in the medical ward.”

I ponder what he means as I wander into an adjacent bathroom and spot a bright pink wizard biscuit hovering above a raised tile. As I pick up the treat, the tile sinks into the floor, and a pillar above ploughs into my tousled head. Crunch.

The thing is, I haven’t got all week to spend in recovery. Every time I get crunched, or set on fire by a torch, or tricked into falling down a trapdoor, I lose a day of my investigation into the evil headmaster Grumblemort and his criminal network, SPIDER. It’s a mission that will take all of my wits, every spell in the book, and possibly quite a few of the landmines found in the dungeon armoury.

HOG OF WAR

Secret Agent Wizard Boy and the International Crime Syndicate is the mashup of Harry Potter and *Deus Ex* you didn’t know you needed. At first, you might dismiss it as the kind of throwaway

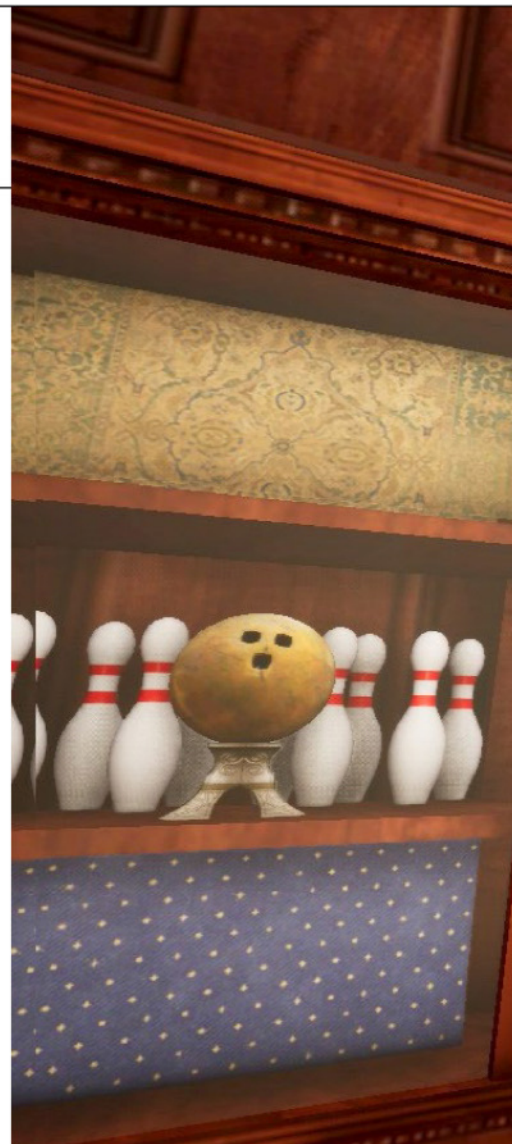
streamer-bait that derives its entertainment value from unexpected slapstick deaths. And sure, there’s some of that. Firing off a single spell in a cupboard stacked with bounce pads and physics objects is likely to see you shredded in seconds. And hitting RT while carrying an explosion potion will cause you not to throw it but to drink it, instantly blowing yourself sky high.

Yet there’s a ‘90s PC gaming spirit at work here that lends your misadventures surprising replay value. Practically any object can be picked up and hurled to trigger distant buttons or bombs. Fittingly for a Hogwarts-esque castle, every area is stuffed with secret entrances, hidden beneath elevators, behind wine barrels, and through doors. There’s even the odd vent. Climb into one of those and you’ll zoom into first-person.

This old-school sensibility is combined with the approachable feel of a 3D platformer. Before long you’ll have unlocked a double jump, and discovered the stone relief in the courtyard which, when hit with a missile, turns the entire lawn into a trampoline. From there you’ll be ping-pong yourself up to the castle’s highest towers, and regularly getting into scrapes with nature’s original cruncher: gravity. Thankfully, *Secret Agent Wizard Boy* is fairly kind when it comes to progression. Even if you have to restart the week, you’ll carry your upgrades and major mission milestones with you, which must be a comfort to your employers at MI6.

The great irony is that, while this is evidently a cheekily violent pastiche of a book series aimed at children, it’s also shaping up to be a fantastic Harry Potter game. Big-budget developers will never truly accommodate the level of freedom and creativity that the concept of magic school suggests. Bound by a commitment to polish, they can’t implement an embiggening curse that makes classmates and furniture incrementally larger to the point that they brush the ceiling, nor a duplication spell that will almost certainly doom a subset of unrestrained players to desktop crashes. But *Secret Agent Wizard Boy* can do it all. Just as soon as the potion’s worn off and his bones have grown back.

Jeremy Peel



OLD-SCHOOL SENSIBILITY IS COMBINED WITH THE FEEL OF A 3D PLATFORMER

Secret Agent Wizard Boy and the International Crime Syndicate



ABOVE: Two seconds later a comically violent death came for Secret Agent Wizard Boy.

LEFT: Kids are prone to a growth spurt but, come on, this is crazy.







NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2025DEVELOPER
AdHoc StudioPUBLISHER
AdHoc StudioLINK
s.team/a/2592160

DISPATCH

Superhero management
in the Telltale mould

For those who've ever sat watching a superhero team-up movie and thought it looks like a logistical and HR nightmare – and we know you're out there – then AdHoc Studio has got the game for you. In *Dispatch*, you're the guy who decides which hero attends which calls for help.

It's not a new idea, but one that gets a fresh presentation from some visual design that makes it look like the best superhero TV show you've never watched, and a Telltale-style gameplay loop that sees you spending as much time talking to your hero team as you do sending them to get cats out of trees.

Funnily enough, several members of AdHoc Studio worked at the original Telltale Games on the *Walking Dead* games, and while the developer famous for *The Wolf Among Us* and *Tales From the Borderlands* folded in 2018 to be replaced by a studio of the same name with different founders, its spirit clearly lives on.

Dispatch makes use of a 2D art style that's so smooth that it could be part of the crop of recent superhero cartoons on streaming services. It makes great use of body language and facial expressions as Robert Robertson, formerly the superhero known as Mecha Man, becomes a dispatcher at SDN after losing his suit in an unspecified manner that will probably all become clear later in the game, especially as a screenshot of Mecha Man in his suit has been released.

The heroes themselves, for all their occasional familiarity, have clearly been a lot of fun to design. Robertson's team is made up of the usual selection of misfits and malcontents we've come to expect from any X-Men-alike, and some of the inspirations are pretty clear too. One is a man who's also a bat. One of them is a red lady with pointy ears, horns and muscles.

HELLO SOLDIER

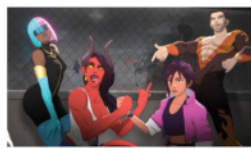
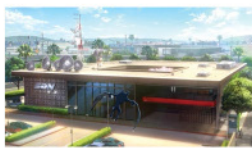
This similarity to Karlach apparently came as a surprise to Dennis Lenart, creative director of *Dispatch* and CTO at AdHoc Studio, when *Baldur's Gate III* was released. "We've been in development on this for a long time," he says. "So when that came out, we're like, 'Oh, everyone's going to think that we just wanted to make a character look like [Karlach]'. Weirdly, the inspiration for that was more of, like, a demon crossed with Cindy Crawford from the '90s Pepsi Super Bowl commercial.

"For Sonar, the man-bat, I seem to remember a Post-It that just said 'literal bat-man'. Then I think it turned into broke Batman for a while. He was a guy that was asking people for money and had gambling issues, but wasn't bad, and then it turned into what it is now, which is kind of a super-ambitious tech bro. Sometimes it is a joke, like literal bat-man was just an actual joke

someone made in the room, and then you start fleshing it out and it becomes a thing. Other times it's based on taking a familiar superhero trope and sort of trying to do a twist on it. Other times, it's just coming up with a character that we think is really interesting."

Art director Derek Stratton agrees: "It's all been done 20 billion times," he says of the process of creating new superheroes. He chose to "take the pressure off and lean into what was going to be interesting about this thing. The characters don't really wear costumes, so I tried to come at it from more of an angle of who these people are. Typically, what you would do is you'd come up with a power set and then you'd wrap the costume, wrap everything, around the power set because ultimately, a character design is driven by what you do. So leaning more into their shape, leaning more into personality type, and really have more of the styling colliding with the workplace

ROBERTSON'S TEAM IS MADE UP OF THE USUAL SELECTION OF MISFITS AND MALCONTENTS



➤ comedy be the secret sauce. Not hyper-focusing on making each character look like this amazing, new, unique thing.”

Robert sits at his wonderfully retro computer with a headset on, and assigns members of the team to deal with problems. At the beginning of the demo they're mainly petty theft or returning a lost balloon to a kid without making them cry, and each comes with a graph showing the kind of skills that will be required to solve the problem in the best way. Each of your heroes has a similar representation of their skills, and it's up to you to match these up even though they rarely fit exactly. Send the right hero and the cat may get out of the tree safely. Send the wrong one, and the tree's soon on fire, the cat is nowhere to be seen, its owner is having a meltdown and the police have been called. Your hero may not be perfect for the job, therefore, but they need to be good enough not to screw it up.

And of course someone is bound to go rogue. In the demo, fiery superhero Flambae goes off-mission on the way back from carrying out a task to which he probably wasn't suited, but was the only team member available for. At the same time, a mysterious blaze breaks out. Hmmmm. The voice acting is superb, with the radio chatter back and forth between the heroes and their handler not only superbly written, but well-acted too. The voice cast for *Dispatch* is a strong one, headed by Jeffrey Wright from *The Batman* and *Casino Royale* and featuring Aaron Paul (*Breaking Bad*), Laura Bailey from *The Last of Us Part II*, and Alanah Pearce from *Cyberpunk 2077*. It also features YouTubers and musicians with names like MoistCr1TiKaL and Thot Squad, about whose acting ability I'm not qualified to comment.

TALK TALK

There's a lot of dialogue, and this being a game from Telltale alumni you have a short time window to choose your replies and reactions. One of the first interactions is with a fellow urinator in the men's lavatory. To fist-bump, or not to fist-bump? Given that the guy you're bumping is huge, tattooed, and doesn't use his hands to steady his aim at his specially adapted

urinal, it's a decision that may take a few seconds to think through.

The map-based parts of the game could be seen as something to get through before the next office meeting or chat by the watercooler, but the two parts of the game tie together nicely in the pursuit of hero management. There's no doubt that the actual work is more stressful than the conversations, though there are jokes strung liberally across both sides. And a lot of swearing too.

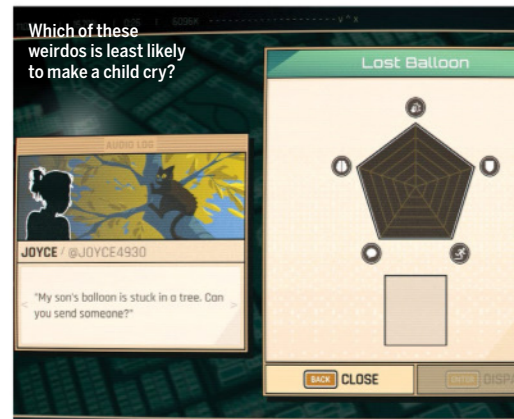
“The demo features Chase, who's played by the incredible Jeffrey Wright, and he ends up being the cussiest character in the game by far,” says AdHoc's CEO and executive director of *Dispatch* Michael Choung. “But in general we're just trying to mirror how people talk, or how these people talk, and if they curse, they curse. In the case of Chase, it's quite a lot. It's like every other word. So if you play the demo, extrapolating that out for what the full game is going to be... yeah... it is quite a lot of cursing.” The team cites shows such as *The Bear* – which has a ripe grasp of language – as an influence.

ORIGINAL BEEF

In fact *The Bear* is an excellent touchpoint for *Dispatch*, a workplace comedy drama in which your co-workers just happen to be made out of clay or very strong. The project that became *Dispatch* the game originated as *Dispatch* the series, with live-action actors. “We originally started in 2018,” says Lenart. “It was going to be a potential live-action interactive TV show. And we spent a bunch of time on that, you know, wrote a season's worth of content, and a thing called COVID hit. Hollywood shut down, everything changed, the tech partner we were working with pivoted their business, and we kind of put it on the shelf for a while. And then when we came back to it, looked at what was there, and thought, there's a lot of great elements, but what about expanding here and here and changing this character? It's kind of like, we started getting more into Barry at the time, and so there's a lot of that influence seeping in.”

Dispatch doesn't have a firm release date at the time of writing, suggesting there's still polishing going on behind the scenes. From the demo and the pedigree of its creators, however, it's clear it's going to emerge as a slickly produced and snappily written slice of life drama in a modern superhero workplace, just like the one in your town.

Ian Evenden



ONE OF THE FIRST INTERACTIONS IS WITH A FELLOW URINATOR



ABOVE: Just another day at the PC Gamer office.

LEFT: Three cries for help, only two available heroes. What to do?



PREVIEW ROUNDUP

By Ian Evenden

Their vision is based on movement.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBA

DEVELOPER
Saber Interactive

PUBLISHER
Saber Interactive

LINK
s.team/a/2208810

JURASSIC PARK SURVIVAL

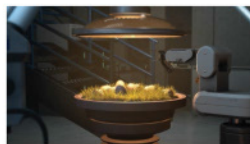
Game developers found a way

If Jurassic Park teaches us anything, it's the same lesson as *Alien*: when you know there's a monster there, get the hell out and don't go back. No, not even you, Mr Scientist-Not-Wearing-A-Helmet. Well guess what? *Survival* is set one day after the first JP movie. They went back.

FIRST
LOOK

This is not the same *Jurassic Park: Survival* as Savage Entertainment's cancelled game for Vivendi from 2001. That game was based on Jurassic Park III, but Saber's game is a wholly original story, a first-person survival shooter in which you take the role of a scientist left behind on the dino-infested island after Sam Neill and pals cleared out.

Well, we say shooter, but there isn't a single gun in the screenshots and trailer released so far. What we do get is an enormous torch, a kitchen scene reminiscent of the one in the movie (and flares to distract the T-rex, whose



footsteps shake the puddles on the ground – the game is clearly big on cinema references, and uses the words 'iconic' and 'beloved' to describe the first film) as well as lots of running through the jungle. Action-adventure certainly seems to be an apt label, as we haven't seen any of the base-building, resource gathering and crafting that are the hallmark of a survival game either.

SAUR POINT

This might make for a more interesting game than one in which a frail scientist builds their own heavy machine gun and mows down raptors for fun, though we'd certainly play that too. What we've got instead is a lot of pre-rendered footage of a game that looks the part, all smashed

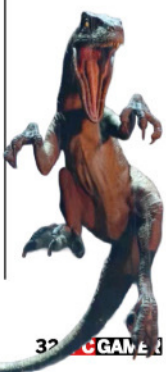
park facilities and driving rain. The Jurassic World movies' shift into creature-based horror seems present too, with dinosaurs a constant threat that adapts to your actions, predators flitting among the trees and leaping out from buildings – even a raptor on a ferry which may foreshadow some doomed attempt to leave the island, thinking you're safe.

The gameplay footage, marked clearly as pre-alpha, doesn't currently match the fidelity of the renders, showing a lot of corridors and dark indoor areas filled with shadows rather than open-world exploration in the lush jungle.

What would be nice are some scenes that capture the wonder of the first JP movie, the moment the palaeontologists see herds of herbivores grazing by the river, or the professor and the massive pile of dung. While that may not always lead to a successful tense, stealthy adventure, it would certainly go a long way toward capturing the atmosphere of a movie the game wants so badly to pay homage to.

The biggest mystery may be why the game didn't come out in time for this year's Jurassic World movie release.

THE GAMEPLAY FOOTAGE DOESN'T MATCH THE FIDELITY OF THE RENDERS





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2026

DEVELOPER
Talesworth Game Studio

PUBLISHER
DreadXP

LINK
s.team/a/3702100

THE SECRET OF WEEPSTONE

Dice with death in a world based on classic RPGs

Looking rather like an advert for the Hercules graphics card from 1982 – the one that could do high-res monochrome – *The Secret of Weepstone* is a dungeon crawler inspired by '80s D&D and the art of the OSR movement, which aims for games that are faithful to the early days of tabletop gaming.

As such, wrong decisions can be fatal and you're not guaranteed a happy ending. Just like real life, really. *Weepstone's* black-and-white line art is its most immediately attention-grabbing feature. The kobolds and skeletons looking like they came from the pages of an RPG rulebook. The trailer does nothing to dispel this, showing the rulebook next to graph paper and dice before zooming into the page, which begins to move.

During the game, dice roll across your field of view as combat moves play out and checks are made against your stats. It's a classic RPG story too, with the once-thriving village of Weepstone now desolate, its lord plagued with dreams of unholy rituals and occult symbols. A group of up to eight join together to discover the

source of all this woe, bashing monsters in turn-based combat and solving devious puzzles along the way.

An interesting addition comes in the form of Mortal Favours. It hasn't been officially announced what these are, but what they appear to mean is that, when you die (and death seems all but inevitable, as your heroes are simple villagers at the beginning) you earn buffs for your next attempt. Whether this points to a roguelite structure for the game, or a

FIRST LOOK

way of reincarnating characters after being chewed to bits by a Stegocentipede, will be an interesting nugget to dig up as the game approaches release.

As exciting as its art style makes the game look, *The Secret of Weepstone* will be nothing without a well-written adventure for your party to enjoy or endure. Right now, it looks like packing enough atmosphere to make exploring its ghastly dungeons and haunted keeps extremely enjoyable.

Starla Beverly

Starla has known the day she would die since she was a child. At least... that's what her cultist parents taught her. She ran away to avoid being their ritual sacrifice, and maybe avoid her fate.

Future Class: Elf

Zealot

VOLUNTEER

I need six more volunteers...

JOURNEY TO KEEP

PREVIEW ROUNDUP

By Ian Evenden



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBA

DEVELOPER
Arik Games, Edo Brenes

PUBLISHER
Arik Games

LINK
s.team/a/3357000

We like a game that sets its expectations out plainly at the start.

DUDE, WHERE IS MY BEER? A NEW HOP

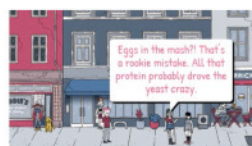
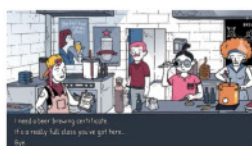
Out on the town in search of booze

A *New Hop* is a scream of rage. The eye-reddening, whole-body-shaking fury of a man who knows what he likes, but can't find it anywhere. The kind of white-hot righteous anger that bristles your moustache and bursts the buttons on your polo shirt. Yes, this is a game about beer.

PLAYED IT

It's actually a sequel. Norwegian developer Arik Games previously released *Dude, Where is My Beer?* in 2020, and *A New Hop* picks up where it left off. There's even a section at the beginning of the demo in which the protagonist recommends you play the first game, but then gives you a recap of where it left off in case you haven't.

And the protagonist likes beer. That's just about all we know about him apart from his dapper taste in facial grooming. Specifically, he likes pilsner, pale golden



lager first brewed in what's now the Czech Republic with a bitter, earthy taste that's best served cold. The Americans have their own version, of course, but it's less flavourful.

What he doesn't like is craft beer, the sort of stuff that tastes like a dirty mop and smells like cat urine, and costs the same as three normal beers. It's full of fruit and even vegetable flavours, is served warm and it's the only kind of beer he can get in this fictionalised version of Oslo. An evil master brewer has banned all pilsner, and is persecuting its drinkers.

Luckily, there's a brewing contest being held, which seems like a good opportunity to brew a pilsner of his own. And you can see where this is going, can't you? As a point-and-click adventure, you

need to talk, fetch, look at, combine and push objects and people to string together chains of unlikely interactions until you reach that goal.

NORWEGIAN BLUE

The entire world is washed in shades of grey, pink, orange and blue. It's a colour scheme carried over from the first game, and it works well to give *A New Hop* a distinct look, with a hand-drawn style that gives it a lot of charm, especially in motion. It's not voiced, but the speech bubbles are clear, and the traditional adventure bar of verbs and inventory items is large enough to see what you're doing without taking over the screen. It's a sharp modernisation of the classic Lucas and Sierra look.

Your character has no idea how to brew his pilsner, so first needs to go on a brewing course, assemble the right ingredients and equipment, while avoiding the dreaded craft beer. It'll also be interesting to see what further Star Wars puns the dev can come up with for future games. The Empire Strikes Bock, anyone?

HE LIKES PILSNER, PALE GOLDEN LAGER FIRST BREWED IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC



THE EXPANSE: OSIRIS REBORN

BELTALOWDA

'opportunities' during fights, such as weaknesses in structures they can exploit to bring it all down on your enemies' heads. You can also send them to create diversions, or leave them on your ship to provide analysis of the situation.

Beginning with a spot of shore leave on the asteroid Ceres, site of a major battle in series six of the TV show, it's not clear yet where the game takes place in official Expanse chronology.

Guns seem to be the major focus in combat, with The Expanse having no psychic powers or magic, though hacking is included, and with your mercenary character able to choose

FIRST
LOOK

between being an Earther, Martian or Belter, you'll also be able to choose sides in *The Expanse's* fraught political environment.

Owlcac Games, of *WH40K: Rogue Trader* fame, makes a third-person cover-shooting RPG from a sci-fi franchise. Isn't that just *Mass Effect*? That's not necessarily a bad thing, and Owlcat is hoping to take the team dynamic of your crew to greater heights, with your companions making the most of

RELEASE
TBA

DEVELOPER
Owlcat Games

PUBLISHER
Owlcat Games

LINK
s.team/a/3727390



This dapper fellow is meant to be part of a church, though we wonder if it's a tomb.

FIRST
LOOK

SYBERIA REMASTERED

Microids winds its franchise up and lets it go

RELEASE
Nov 6, 2025

DEVELOPER
Microids Studio Paris

PUBLISHER
Microids

LINK
s.team/a/3660220

Syberia is a puzzley third-person graphic adventure first released in 2002, created by Belgian artist Benoît Sokal. It casts you

as an American lawyer exploring an alternate-history Europe where clockwork really took off, and wind-up automata are everywhere within

locations that can be tackled in a non-linear fashion. This remastered game fixes up some of the puzzles as well as the graphics. Sweet!

Battlefield 6

T H E O F S I X J O Y

BATTLEFIELD 6
is coming,
and could be
a renaissance
for the series

By Jake Tucker



COVER FEATURE

Battlefield 6

COV 4 / 4  
RECON  

Sit on a hill miles away from the objective and pretend you're being useful. Or use your scouting tools to help.

Battlefield is back. For the first time in years it feels like Dice – and the collection of other dev studios that has assembled like the Avengers to make *Battlefield 6* happen – might just have recaptured the series' magic. A back to basics shooter that emphasises teamwork and emergent chaos is just what *Battlefield* needs.

The *Battlefield 6* beta was hugely successful, showing a streamlined first-person shooter that captures the magic of the series in its earlier days. It's heavy on the emergent chaos and lighter on big buzzwords and systems that most players didn't really want

to interact with. In its best moments teams surge forwards like ants, and you feel like a cog – step away from a door to reload or heal and another player would step into your spot.

Fights, particularly in the beta's more close-quarters maps, feel like a teeming mass as players fight to defend flanks or overrun those defending. Fighting through an art gallery and the surrounding buildings and alleyways in New York, the confrontation rumbles forwards between smoke and rubble. The balance feels razor sharp, and the wall of defending enemies feels impenetrable until the dam breaks and the attackers flood through.

It's reminiscent of *Battlefield 3*, a high point in franchise history, and that's by design. Talking to developers at both the Los Angeles

and London reveal events, everyone was eager to share how *Battlefield 3* and *4* were the touchstones for its design. After years of experimentation, EA just wants to play the hits. "When we decided we wanted to do something in the near future, we looked at other *Battlefield*'s from the same era," says lead producer Nika Bender. "We knew that *Battlefield 3* and *4* were the fan favourites, and we really are leaning into what really worked and hope that this will continue resonating with players in *Battlefield 6*."

Salim Fasahat, design director at Criterion Games, added that those two games were "obvious jumping off points," but says that the aim in this one was to take all of the learnings that EA had before "upping it to a level that hasn't been done before".

BELOW: You can now drag bodies before reviving them.

A STREAMLINED FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER THAT CAPTURES THE MAGIC OF THE SERIES



Playing it safe feels bold in a world where people expect every new game to bring a cornucopia of new stuff, but from my limited experience playing at the event and during the subsequent beta weekends, it seems to be what the team has delivered. The moment to moment act of actually playing the game feels like *Battlefield 3*, with players flooding through choke points and barrelling across the map. This is class warfare, and every soldier I saw was an identikit grunt rather than the sort-of recognisable specialists from *Battlefield 2042*.

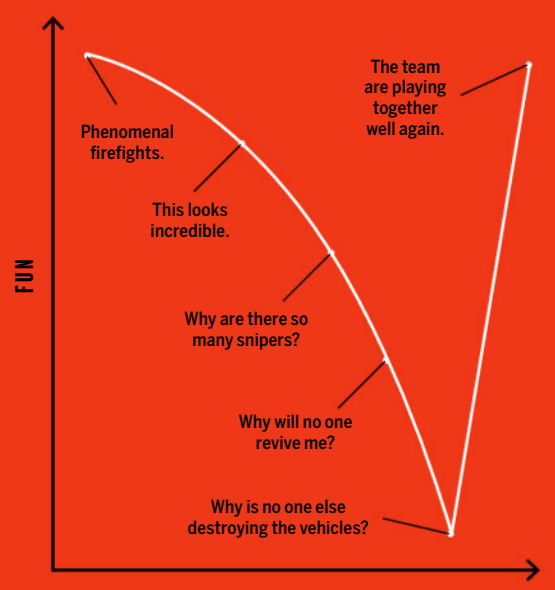
CLASS WARFARE

The class system has returned and despite the fact every class can now pick every weapon, *2042*'s proficiency system returns here as signature

COV 2 / 4  
ENGINEER  
Kill the enemy vehicles, repair the friendly vehicles and desperately hunt a support down for extra rockets and supplies.

FIRE IN THE HOLE

The first few hours of *Battlefield 6*



weapons to push people to using the 'right' armaments for their class.

Fasahat says the current system is a nice middle ground. "Rather than be kind of locked into specific classes and roles, here you can express yourself with the loadouts that you want," adds Fasahat. "Obviously, that comes with a little bit of a penalty in terms of signatures and sticking to those specific classes or weapons and gadgets. But at the same time, players also have the opportunity to customise and play how they want to, and have loadouts that they feel comfortable with. So it's kind of a nice middle ground, which I think kind of touches both sides and hits the sweet spot."

Personally, I'd prefer it if they locked people into a specific set of weapons for their class, but giving players more room to express themselves is a hard cause to argue against. At first it's jarring to see that the Support's supply bag was capable of dishing out both healing and ammo, but actually I've come to view this as a refinement in making sure

that Support players can quickly be valuable. The *Battlefield* purist in me wishes I had an ammo box, but actually FPS players have become more solipsistic over the years, so letting one charitably minded player take care of your physical and logistical pain just makes good sense.

The speed is now much higher, a classic problem as mobility improves. Mobility is one of the biggest areas of improvement for *Battlefield 6*, and your character can vault, slide and even combat roll to kill the momentum when you're falling from height. This, in addition to the fact you can grab hold of the back of vehicles to shuttle around the place, means infantry feel super mobile and this, combined with the quick time-to-kill, means that while it's the *Battlefield* you remember, it's zippy and death comes at you pretty fast.

Being able to grapple onto the back of vehicles is a godsend for engineer players who would previously have had to choose between balancing precariously on top of the tank with a repair tool in hand or scuttle along the

Battlefield 6

COV 1 / 4  
ASSAULT  
 Kicking doors and making entry is the Assault's bread and butter. Use your shotgun to blow holes in walls and doors.

game, and moving forward it'll probably be a staple of development for us, to be honest."

It's popular enough that the team plans to continue the initiative. Talking to Fasahat post-beta, he says that even a month out from launch the team was still running Battlefield Labs tests, this time on some tweaks from feedback they noticed during the beta.

"I think some of that testing is weapons related," Fasahat says. "I know there was a lot of time-to-kill and time-to-death stuff that the community was raising and these are part of some explorations and tweaks that we're currently testing in Labs."

"I think another unspoken pillar of our development is how much we believe in the power of tapping into the community and what the

road behind them, trying to keep up as the tank manoeuvres. This sort of addition is what, for me, *Battlefield 6* is doing best at this early stage. It's *Battlefield*, but how your brain remembers it, rather than how it actually was.

"I play engineer, I always play engineer," adds Fasahat. "For me that was so cool, because I could stay with the tank. I could get off and fix it and then jump back on and move to the next objective. That kind of ties in with what we call kinesthetic combat and movement. Like, how can we keep the player engaged with the environment and what's happening without necessarily pulling them out of it? And that's where all of the combat roles and climbing onto the back of a tank and obviously dragging and reviving your squad mates, all of that kind of fits under that ecosystem of kinesthetic combat."

LABORATORY CONDITIONS

Lots of these improvements Fasahat credits to Battlefield Labs, the community development

programme that got players in to try the game out early, the earliest example of public-facing playtesting I can think of. Before *Battlefield 6* was even announced, players with a stack of hours in EA's other *Battlefield* games were invited to jump on and give things a crack.

"Developing on a live game, you can easily get players feedback," says Bender. "BF Labs is our way of getting players' feedback during development time, while we can still address it. This means that by the time the game is out there it includes player feedback, and we give players what they want."

Labs let players in early, earlier than most widespread playtesting and it was an excellent marketing move. When footage leaked of a *Battlefield* that felt tight even at this early phase, the buzz was huge.

Fasahat also credits some of the refinements in the beta were directly related to getting players in early when the game was still coming together. "Battlefield Labs has been a big part of dev for this

DUCK AND COVER

The *Battlefield 6* experience



INTENSE FIREFIGHTS 30%
When the action really gets going in *Battlefield 6*, it doesn't stop.

LOOKING FOR AMMO 20%
You're looking to reload, you're going to want to stay by your Support pals.

RUNNING FROM RESPAWN 10%
Running from respawn back to the fight is a nice break from the action.

BEING BLINDED BY SNIPER GLARE 10%
Defending will see you looking out over a lot of tiny lights.

BLOWING UP A WALL JUST TO SEE IF YOU CAN 10%
I regret nothing.

BLOWING UP A WALL FOR TACTICAL REASONS 10%
Now you're thinking with portals.

community wants," says Bender. "There's a lot of new takes, a lot of exploration and a lot of new experimentation. Because we still wanted to create a completely new *Battlefield* experience, but I know we tapped a lot into the fan favourites from those two games."

APPETITE FOR DESTRUCTION

The buzzphrase for *Battlefield 6* is tactical destruction. I'm not certain it's worth putting on such a pedestal, as *Battlefield* has been destroying things better than nearly everyone else since *Bad Company 2*. *Battlefield 3* had smart destruction that would allow you to clear out sniper nests by hitting them with a grenade launcher, shattering walls. *Battlefield 6* is in a similar place: things that you feel should explode often will, but it

doesn't feel like anything *Battlefield* hasn't done before.

The only thing truly unexpected from *Battlefield 6*'s destruction is how pretty and well optimised it is, with performance remaining rock-solid even as the map comes apart around you. Speaking to PC Gamer at a preview event in Los Angeles, *Battlefield 6*'s technical director Christian Buhl explained that the smooth performance is down to iteration and testing.

"Maybe the only magic trick is that we're not on the PS4 or Xbox One any more," says Buhl. "So we've kind of raised the floor of what we have in terms of memory and CPU speed, and so obviously, raising that floor helps with improving performance overall, since we're not trying to get the

game to run on a PS4, for example. Other than that, it's just a lot of work, right? It's the testing, it's testing destruction, it's optimising different areas. We're using the Frostbite engine, of course, and the Frostbite engine was sort of built for *Battlefield*. It was built for destruction. And those pieces are core parts of the engine. When I say we tested and fixed issues, sometimes that was the *Battlefield* team fixing an issue. I don't think there was any magic bullet. It was just a lot of testing, a lot of iteration, a lot of work.

CHAOS THEORY

The changes all feel like they're moving in the right direction. As a *Battlefield* fan, it felt like 2042's biggest misstep was that in trying to

BELOW: A future quad kill.



**BF HAS BEEN DESTROYING THINGS
BETTER THAN NEARLY EVERYONE
ELSE EVER SINCE BAD COMPANY 2**

A dynamic in-game scene from Battlefield 6. In the foreground, a soldier in full combat gear, including a helmet with a night vision or thermal scope, is crouched and aiming a rifle. Behind him, another soldier is positioned near a large, dark-colored armored vehicle, possibly a tank or APC, which is partially obscured by smoke and dust. In the upper right, a military helicopter with 'PA-A' markings is flying. The environment is a rocky, mountainous terrain with a lot of atmospheric haze and smoke, suggesting a recent battle or ongoing conflict. Red lines connect the text boxes to specific elements in the scene: one points to the soldier in the foreground, another points to the tank, and a third points to the helicopter.

SOLDIERS

This is how you'll spend most of your time in *Battlefield 6*. Movement has been improved so you'll feel agile and well-armed.

INTENSE FIREFIGHTS 30%

When the action really gets going in *Battlefield*, it doesn't stop

TANK

Armour feels a little weak in *Battlefield 6*, but you can guarantee that a tank shell will still mess up your day.

» refocus on the core pillars of the game, the team identified the most essential part of *Battlefield* as its chaos. In the reveal trailer they showed off their own version of a Rendezook, a nearly once-in-a-lifetime moment where a player hurled himself out of a jet, blasted the jet chasing him and then landed safely back in his own jet.

This chaos was the aim, and so *Battlefield 2042* was jammed full of new ideas: you could call vehicles

in from the sky, customise your weapons on the fly or even just wingsuit into a tornado. Dice put all of these things in the blender and left the lid off, bringing chaos but very little else.

The addition of Specialists, individual characters who exemplified *Battlefield's* classic classes but were also laden down with *Overwatch*-ish gadgets, was particularly reviled, and while later updates brought back the class

system of old, the specialists and their gadgets remained.

As a long-term fan myself, I found the ability to customise your weapons on the fly was a major misstep, as it added complexity to firefights and meant I'd spend more time fiddling with my guns as I moved around the map instead of just getting stuck in. Players were less specialised, and if you were willing to faff around you could keep your gun optimal in all situations, snapping a red dot sight on

THE TEAM TOOK NOTICE OF WHAT PEOPLE RESONATED WITH OR HATED

HELICOPTER

Helicopters are godless killing machines in *Battlefield*. I haven't seen one in *Battlefield 6* yet, but I'm already scared of good chopper pilots.

JEEP

Ignore the machine gun, transport vehicles are absolute death traps in *Battlefield*. Use this to get where you're going, and then ditch.

your sniper rifle as you cleared buildings before switching back to a long-range scope for taking people out. Great news for player freedom, but bad for forcing people to work together. *Battlefield 2042* went on to have something of a redemption arc and found an audience, but the flaws are still embedded deeply in the experience. The team took notice of what people resonated with or hated.

If there's anything I'm worried about from my time with *Battlefield*

6 so far, it's that combat is ridiculously fast. Vehicle combat feels sluggish in comparison and my time in a vehicle was often spent desperately trying to avoid the soldiers rushing at me from all sides toting shoulder-mounted rockets. On foot I could barely catch a second to revive players because players were giving up, burning a ticket to get back into the action. When players did bravely hang on, enemies would slide across the ground towards me

at high speed, toting submachine guns and the desire to kill. It's the sort of speed you see in *Call of Duty*, a high-velocity low-drag approach that has seen *Call of Duty* become one of the biggest entertainment franchises in the world, but has alienated people that can't keep up.

COMBAT EVOLVED

This brings us to the tactical elephant in the room, the unspoken fact that *Battlefield's* competition isn't the

Battlefield 6

» other *Battlefield* games that have come before it, but Activision's *Call of Duty: Black Ops 7*, launching in November. *Call of Duty* has long been the biggest shooter franchise in the world and I don't think that's going to change here no matter how successful *Battlefield 6* may be. But it does feel like *Battlefield 6* has something to offer players that are feeling burnt out by the bright, ridiculous skins and near-future warfare, but also gamers who want to feel like they're part of something bigger than stacking up a few kills and unleashing kill streaks.

There's a real sense of community anger at *Call of Duty* at the moment, with a popular fan cry being that *Black Ops* and *Modern Warfare* no longer feel grounded because you can play as a Teenage Mutant Ninja

BELOW: Combined arms warfare is still *Battlefield's* biggest strength.

Turtle, despite the fact that *Call of Duty: World at War* had a full-blown zombie mode back in 2008. Whether these complaints have merit is irrelevant though, because the voices saying it are cacophonous.

Both games have a place to exist and offer different FPS fantasies, but *Battlefield* is going to get a month's head start to try and convince players it's the real deal when it launches on October 10. *Black Ops 7*, meanwhile, is holding an open beta in the run-up to launch between October 2-8, no doubt hoping to win some fans before everyone feels the call to battle.

While I am suffering a little bit as my 36-year-old reflexes try to keep up with *Battlefield 6's* blistering pace, there's a lot of good stuff here and the community is eating it up. The

attitude in the *Battlefield* Reddit right now is one of jubilation as people post their clips from the betas and even come together to talk about how excited they are for the new game.

There are plenty of clips to go through, too: Steam has *Battlefield 6's* beta peaking at 521,079 players, making it the 19th most popular game on the platform in terms of player peak of all time. That's just Steam, too, and the statistic doesn't count consoles or those playing using EA's own EA App.

ONWARDS TO VICTORY

The best indicator of success? *Battlefield 2042* currently has scores of players locked in to try and finish its final battlepass, which promises dedicated players the chance to unlock cosmetics for *Battlefield 6* if

**GAMERS WHO WANT TO FEEL LIKE
THEY'RE PART OF SOMETHING BIGGER
THAN STACKING UP A FEW KILLS**



COV 3 / 4  
 SUPPORT  

Give other classes ammo, use your health to keep them upright and bemoan them giving up before you can use your defibs.

HISTORY LESSON

Battlefield's best bits



BATTLEFIELD 1942 2002

The very first game, *Battlefield 1942* was originally pitched as a GameCube exclusive title.



BATTLEFIELD 2 2005

Battlefield's first 'full' sequel, *Battlefield 2* brought combat into the modern era.



BATTLEFIELD 2142 2006

Big stompy mechs, the last *Battlefield* game to feature Commander mode, *2142* was great fun.



BAD COMPANY 2 2010

The first game to go all-in on destruction, it wasn't uncommon to see buildings get demolished.



BATTLEFIELD 3 2011

Just one year later, Dice delivered the best *Battlefield* game ever made. It's a fan favourite.



BATTLEFIELD 1 2016

The WWI shooter doesn't feel like a 'real' *Battlefield*, but you can ride horses at tanks in this one.

they can complete a series of missions that, frankly, has players hurling smoke grenades around and pelting around the map in hovercraft hunting for roadkills. *Battlefield 6*, then, is so good that players are heading back to a game they'd already softly rejected, desperate to get their fix. The vibes, both here and in the *Battlefield* community, are impeccable as the community is ready for something very special.

This hinges on a few things landing: players are worried about the lack of big maps in the beta, something Fasahat says was deliberate. "There was an intention behind the maps that the players were allowed to play during the open beta," he explains. "They were intentionally smaller than the ones we know are coming. This is for a few reasons, but that was planned to get a better idea of some of the different modes, the scale at which they operate, what kind of modes work with what type of maps, and there's a lot of good stuff that's come out of that. I think people have a lot

to look forward to, and we're super excited to kind of have people explore all of those maps."

Buhl adds, "You know, in some ways it's easier to test and focus on gun play when we're doing the smaller maps. So those were the ones we started with. And also, technically, it's easier. Hey, let's start with our technically easiest maps. Get those up and running, and now it's just sort of time to put some of our bigger maps out there, right, and test the bigger experiences. So, you know, we've been planning on launching with these maps all along, but you know, this is the first time we're going to put some of the really big maps onto BF Labs, obviously we were going to do it."

It's rare to see a studio working this closely with its audience, and it's hard not to be swept up in the excitement from both developers and the community. No one can guarantee a live game lands in 2025, but *Battlefield 6* feels like it has a real shot. It's fun, bombastic, and unapologetically *Battlefield*. ■

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Twenty-five years ago, **BALDUR'S GATE II** set videogame RPGs on the path to becoming the industry-defining genre they are today. Here's how.

By Robert Zak

Baldur's Gate II

In 1998, *Baldur's Gate* redefined what a computer RPG – and videogame interpretation of the D&D ruleset – could be. Just two years later, *Baldur's Gate II* expanded on it so much that development nearly ballooned out of control. This is the story of one of the most influential and ambitious RPGs ever made.

Many of the great RPGs are etched into the popular imagination by their beginnings, those tentative first steps in a new fantasy world that tease the vastness ahead, and the freedom to carve your own path through it. Think stepping out of the Census and Excise Office in *Morrowind*'s Seyda Neen in and realising you can just march off in any direction, or riding through No Man's Land in Velen in *The Witcher 3* where distant ruins and unknown wilderness call to you like sirens with deadly intent.

The first steps into *Baldur's Gate II*'s world are one of those moments. After a tough opening sequence that sees you escaping captivity from the wizard Irenicus, you emerge into Waukeen's Promenade, the trading hub of Amn's central city of Athkatla. Surrounded by golden minarets, it's a bustling amphitheatre of traders and thieves, wealthy and poor – a filthy and vibrant snapshot of urban plenitude. Within this district alone you'll find a circus leading to a pocket dimension, a shop selling goods from different planes of the Forgotten Realms, and all manner of pedlars and big personalities. Then, once you leave the area you see that it's just one of seven districts in Athkatla, which itself is just one of several regions in the nation of Amn that you get to explore. Even 25 years on, that sense of opportunity is exhilarating.

The nation of Amn – equal parts Venetian merchant republic and Constantinople-esque cultural crossroads – was largely uncharted territory in the D&D universe, which is precisely why BioWare chose it for the game's setting, as lead designer Kevin Martens explains. “We deliberately chose a part of Faerûn that was not well explored so that we could do what we wanted,” he tells me. “Forgotten Realms has all sorts of adventure hooks, and we wanted to use those and fill something out

without stepping on anyone else's toes.” Setting the game in Amn gave BioWare something of a blank slate within a D&D context, opening up a Pandora's Box of creative freedom that proved almost impossible to keep under control.

HIGH DEX DEVELOPMENT

Following the success of the original *Baldur's Gate* in 1998, BioWare was immediately set to work on *Baldur's Gate II*, and there were several factors that meant development got off to a blisteringly fast start. Firstly, BioWare had already built the Infinity Engine, which meant a lot of technical legwork was out of the way and that the team could really focus on the fun stuff of actually designing the game. Producer Ray Muzyka outlined a feature list for the sequel that included character relationships on par with *Final Fantasy* and the inclusion of famous D&D monsters. This outline reflected the maximalist approach in the making of *Baldur's Gate II*. “We were putting all the fantasies that we had into the game,” Mertens tells me. “What were our favourite parts of all of our childhood campaigns? What were our favourite parts of every fantasy book we'd read, of *Temple of Elemental Evil*? We were just stuffing it all in.”

On that art front, BioWare benefitted from trading monsters with Black Isle Studios, which was working on fellow AD&D Infinity Engine game *Icwind Dale*. Meanwhile, clashes between the art and design teams were circumvented by art director Marcia Tofer. “She



“WE WERE PUTTING ALL THE FANTASIES THAT WE HAD INTO THE GAME”

gave us a massive library of different areas, so we could often get what we needed in ten minutes instead of sequentially waiting for art,” says Mertens. “It's also the fact that she knew what would look good for the game and understood our needs.”





BALDUR'S BOX OFFICE GATE

Who of today's acting crop would best play which role in Baldur's Gate II?



**VICONIA
ANYA
TAYLOR-JOY**

Naturally elfin features, and with proven action chops from her turn in *Furiosa*. Just coat her in blue and she's good to go.



**MINSC
DAVE BAUTISTA**

While the former wrestler tends towards more stolid characters, Minsc's 'simpleton' shtick could be just what Dave needs to break out of his typecasting cycle.



**JON IRENICUS
BENEDICT
CUMBERBATCH**

Alien and ageless in appearance, and with an air of aloof authority, the man best known for Dr Strange would be uniquely well suited to play the bad guy.



**IMOEN
SOPHIE
THATCHER**

Great at the whole 'traumatised young adult' thing. Also, we can probably scrap Imoen's squeaky 'little sister' voice in favour of something more assertive.



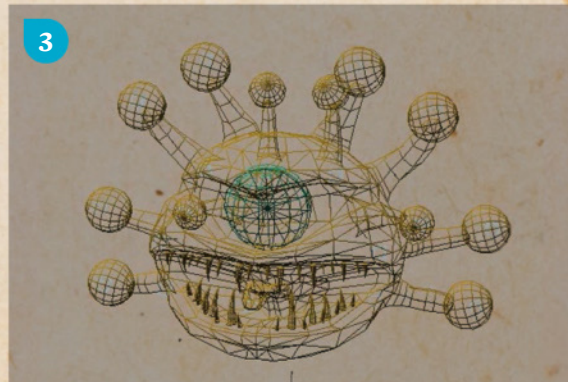
**JAHEIRA
OLIVIA WILDE**

A spitting image for the iconic Harper, and an ass-kicker as seen in *Tron: Legacy*, Wilde just needs to slap on a thick slavic accent (which anyone can do, right?)



**ANOMEN
CHRIS PINE**

Pine's lead turn in the D&D movie was already one arrogant statement short of Anomen. Just tinge the character with an underlying sadness due to unresolved daddy issues.



1 *Baldur's Gate II*: A timeless RPG epic today, a paradigm shift back in 2000.

2 The real-time-with-pause combat was chaotic and splatery, making each fight feel like a vicious skirmish.

3 A wireframe mesh for a Beholder, which you'll be seeing plenty of in *BGII*.

4 The art department had its work cut out trying to include the bulk of the D&D bestiary.



1



“PEOPLE DON’T COME HERE TO ROMANCE, THEY COME TO FIGHT SHIT AND BATTLE DRAGONS!”

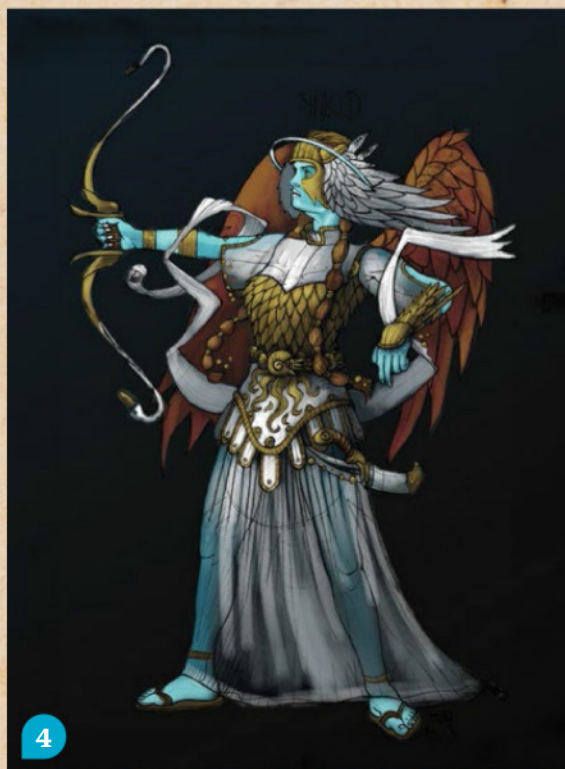
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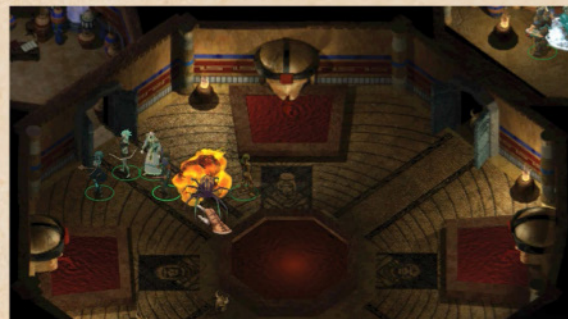
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✦ SCALING UP

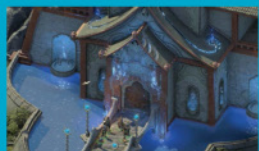
Baldur's Gate II quickly started taking the shape of a toybox of D&D adventuring – a D&D greatest hits collection bundled into a plot that followed on directly from the original game. Yes, your goal was to retrieve your half-sister Imoen and your soul from the dastardly Irenicus, but along the way you could take on vampiric clans in hieroglyph-adorned tombs, get embroiled in a conflict between two mafia-like ruling families in the City of Trademeet (which is being held to ransom by a faction of genies), or become a feudal overlord in your country estate.

You'd encounter everything from beholders to dragons, liches to maddened cannibal halflings. At one point, in a foreshadowing of *Baldur's Gate III*, you might even find yourself joining forces with Githyanki and facing off against an Elder Brain. Even if *Baldur's Gate II* didn't hit Muzyka's quixotic target of featuring every famous D&D monster, the breadth of possibilities was breathtaking.



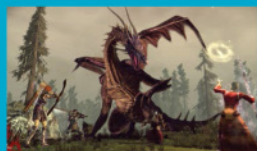
LONG SHADOWS

BGII's influence can be felt through the ages



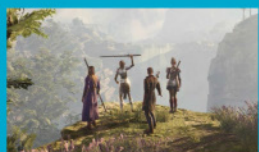
PILLARS OF ETERNITY

Obsidian's series is a great interpretation of what the early *Baldur's Gate* games might've looked like were they made today. Stunning backdrops and a top-down perspective.



DRAGON AGE: ORIGINS

If you can look past the muddy late 2000s aesthetic, BioWare's (and David Gaider's) own *Baldur's Gate* spiritual successor is a worthy follow-up, with fun companions and good combat.



BALDUR'S GATE III

Larian's stab at the IP is further removed from the *Baldur's Gate* style than other games, instead opting for the toyboxy Larian style the studio honed through its *Divinity* games.



PATHFINDER: WRATH OF THE RIGHTEOUS

While the Pathfinder rules will take some learning for those used to D&D and *Baldur's Gate*, doing so unlocks an impressively deep RPG adventure.

The density of the world was matched by the writing. The number of recruitable companions decreased for *Baldur's Gate II* (from 25 to 17), but now each one had fleshed out motives and histories, as well as unique relationships with the player and each other. Lukas Kristjanson, designer and writer for *Baldur's Gate II*, and key writer for Jaheira's quest, tells me that, "*Baldur's Gate II* was something like 1.8 million words. I think Jaheira's word count in *BGII* was more than all 24 companions in *Baldur's Gate I* combined."

The quest for Jaheira – straight-talking Harper and co-icon of the series alongside perennial hamster pal Minsc – would prove to be a microcosm for *Baldur's Gate II*'s development – expansive almost

to breaking point. She not only had the most dialogue, but also an elaborate personal quest which Kristjanson merged with her romance quest, so that if the player romanced Jaheira, it could affect the outcome of her personal quest.

Quest design was facilitated by new tools that allowed writers to effectively script their own scenes. "We had a visualisation tool called Dotty which would draw the conversation in bubbles," Kristjanson begins. "If you got it right, it looked like the Crystalline Entity from *Star Trek*, just beautiful, but if you're a dumbass like me and plug Jaheira into it, it just breaks the machine." The tool couldn't wrap its head around the timings from merging Jaheira's companion quest and romance, and there simply was no time to fix everything. "By the end of the project, James [Ohlen] put a sign on his door saying, 'If it's about Jaheira, don't knock,'" says Kristjanson. "I've been paying the karmic debt for that for decades." This was just one of many cases where powerful tools and efficient pipelines gave designers so much freedom that they'd get too ambitious with the power in their hands.

While romance feels like a near-necessity in modern RPGs, at the time it was a largely alien concept, as designer and writer David Gaider explains. "The whole romance thing was just an experiment, like James had no idea that anybody would even like this," Gaider begins. "We were writing these long stories, and they were cool, but romance? It was like, 'People don't come here to romance, they come here to fight shit and battle dragons!'"

Gaider also insisted to Ohlen that "he was not a romantic guy," and tried to get off the hook from writing companion romances. "Of course James said, 'No,'" recalls Gaider, and

he was ultimately tasked with writing the romance for Anomen, the entitled, arrogant cleric that everyone loved to hate. Gaider was also lined up to write romances for companions Valygar and Haer'Dalis, but due to the wariness around how well romances would go down with the audience, as well as the headaches caused by Jaheira's romance, they were eventually dropped.

ALL OR NOTHING

Narratively, trauma was a driving force for *Baldur's Gate II*'s wayfaring characters and their arcs – a storytelling device that would go on to be used in RPGs to this day. These weren't just archetypal D&D heroes, but people with serious stuff to work through. Anomen may be an insufferable toff, but once you meet his unloving tyrant of a father – think King Lear or *Game of Thrones* Tywin Lannister – you see where it all comes from and have the chance to help him heal (or make him worse, for that matter). The Drow Viconia, in response to persecution by her own people and other races, meanwhile, projects the evil Drow stereotype which only exacerbates negative attitudes towards her and thus continuing the cycle.

Almost every character is tinged with a humanising pathos, even the comic-relief gnome Jan Janssen whose romantic prospects are doomed by his nice guy tropes, Mertens suggests. This was all heavy subject matter for a studio of 20-somethings that Gaider described as a friendly frat house. "I don't know how we were able to be so subtle in our storytelling," says Mertens. "But it's cool that we figured it out."

Merging all of *Baldur's Gate II*'s disparate snippets and sidequests of storytelling into a cohesive whole was a challenge. When I ask Gaider how this was achieved, he laughs, "I

1 The drow city of Ust Natha has the feel of a pleasure palace with an interior designed by Pinhead.

2 The mysterious Djinn populate the nation of Amn, making for powerful allies and dangerous enemies.

3 Many an adventurer was driven mad by not knowing you need fire or acid to finish off pesky trolls.

4 Killing godlike beings is par for the course in the *Throne of Bhaal* expansion.

Baldur's Gate II



Irenicus brooding over his terrible life choices.

» don't know, is it cohesive?" Gaider arrived on *Baldur's Gate II* from the hotel industry, based on his reputation as a master Dungeons & Dragons DM in the local area. Despite not having any videogame experience, his DM background gave him a strong baseline for the CRPG storytelling. "With games, you don't know what the player's thinking, but you can throw hooks of various things that might interest them and guide them down the path you want with little bread crumbs," he tells me. "And that's exactly what you do as a DM, right? You're trying to imagine how different types of players would approach the same thing."

Every designer on the game was driven by a design ethos of there are no bad choices. This meant that every class in the game could do a stronghold quest that gave you a place to call your own in the world; a fighter could become lord of a countryside castle and set exploitative tax rates for the local peasantry (with corresponding risk of revolt), while completing the Thieves' Guild questline would let you become a criminal taskmaster and preside over various underground activities around Athkatla. You could not be all things at once, which helped each playthrough feel bespoke and built around your choices.

Around half of *Baldur's Gate II* is contained in chapter two (out of

seven), where your solitary main quest goal is raising 20,000 gold to get aid from the Thieves' Guild (or, alternatively, the vampires). While that may feel simplistic by today's standards, it allowed the player to inhabit the world and find their place in it via whatever means they wanted: whether you wanted to head out into the wilderness in search of classic dungeoneering or make a name for yourself in Athkatla's underground fighting circuit, it was up to you. "As a hook, the 20,000 gold

ATHKATLA

Athkatla's diverse districts will keep you occupied for most of the game; tomb-raiding liches in the graveyard, pit fighting, slavery rings, serial killer investigations, you'll find it all right here!

WATCHER'S KEEP

The most challenging dungeon in *Baldur's Gate II* – you can play it in the main campaign with the Enhanced Edition, but for story cohesion purposes you should probably jump in after starting the *Throne of Bhaal* expansion.

pieces thing was kind of lame, but as a system that supported narrative I think it was really good," says Mertens. "You have absolute freedom but you're still accomplishing the critical path, which is hard to do."

This structure occurred almost by accident, according to David Gaider – a result of the all-in approach to development that resulted in *Baldur's Gate II* being loaded with content in chapter two, before becoming a more linear adventure in subsequent chapters.

**DE'ARNISE KEEP**

Fighter classes can complete the De'Arnise Keep stronghold quest and rule over their own little fiefdom, dealing with local problems such as floods and invasions, and taxing the hell out of the local peasantry.

**“YOU HAVE ABSOLUTE FREEDOM
BUT YOU’RE STILL ACCOMPLISHING
THE CRITICAL PATH”**

“It was like a snake swallowing a house,” says Gaider. “Chapter two was so monumental, it was all growing exponentially and if we’d continued like that I assume the game would’ve crashed.” But at the time, the designers didn’t have a sense of the game’s excessive growth. In fact, they felt the opposite. “I remember conversations about it being too short,” Mertens begins. “We were worried there wasn’t enough there, which is ironic given the 240-hour playtime,” says



Mertens. “I think if we’d had a tight 200, it’d still have been a good game.”

THE FINAL ACT

As release loomed, the production needed help, and Black Isle Studios’ Feargus Urquhart was drafted in to bring the scope creep under control. “I went to Brian [Fargo, Interplay CEO] about six months before *BGII* was supposed to come out and asked him, ‘so how important is it that *BGII* ships for Christmas this year [2000]?’” Urquhart tells me. “He

said, ‘Well, we might not all have jobs next year if it doesn’t.’ My response was, ‘OK, well I guess I’m spending a lot of time in Edmonton over the next six months!’”

Urquhart filled the BioWare corridor with whiteboards, with every quest on it having two Xs. “The first X was the designer says the quest is done and ready to test, the second was QA says the quest has been tested and has no bugs,” says Urquhart. “If QA found a bug, they would put the X back under the

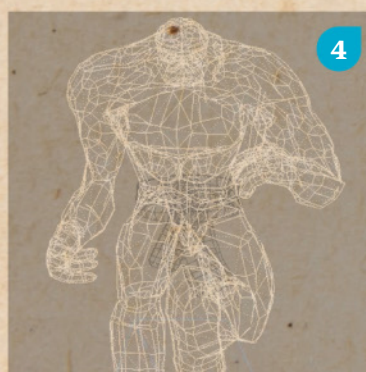
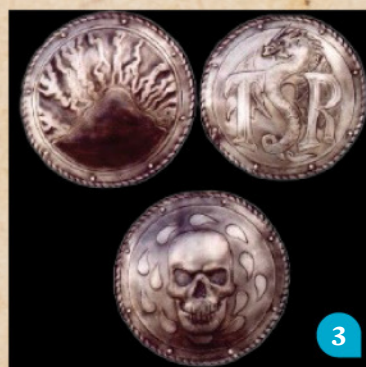


1 Where *Baldur's Gate III*'s Illithid lairs were visceral and fleshy, BioWare's were alien and Giger-esque.

2 These bruisers are the least of your troubles in *Baldur's Gate II*.

3 An assortment of *Baldur's Gate II* coinage. Fancy!

4 Golems - stubbornly resistant to magic, but will crumble when faced with a mace.



✖ designer column." Inevitably, many Xs remained, which meant that the cutting axe started coming down on quests and romances deemed too buggy or secondary to what was needed to get the game out the door. "There was this spider cult quest, and we got rid of the entire thing," rues Gaider. "There was a bit of uproar because everybody loved it so much."

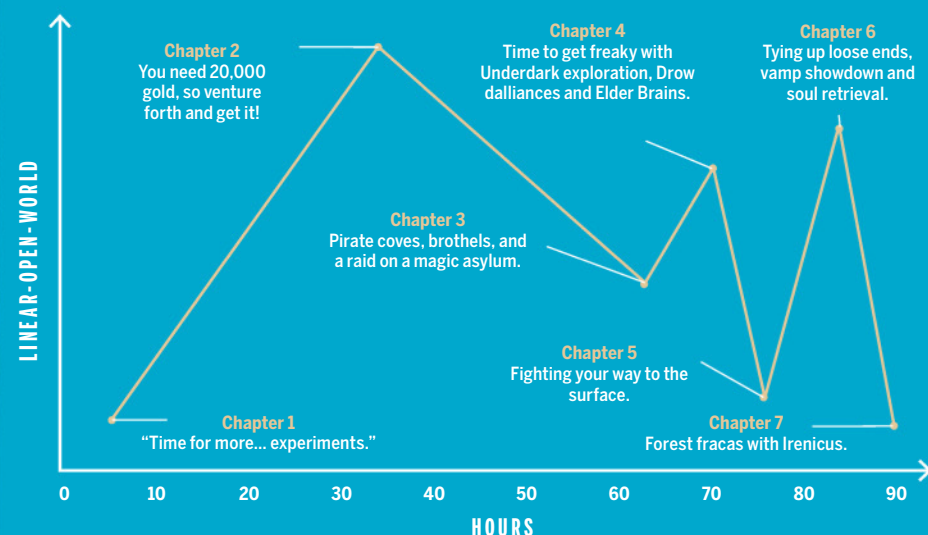
But it was not all cuts. Determined to attain their goal of every class having a stronghold, the team created the Druids' Grove stronghold questline within a three-day time window. "It wasn't the best one, but we couldn't let the game go out and not give the Druids their stronghold," Mertens recalls.

The villain Irenicus also received a late-game revamp. "For 90% of development Irenicus was human, and just a megalomaniac," says Gaider. "He didn't have much reason to attack Suldane'sellar, so James [Ohlen] was like, 'I want the story to give him a personal tie to the place.'" With this, Irenicus became an exiled elf and scorned lover of an elven



CHAPTER TIMES AND LINEARITY

Baldur's Gate II fluctuates between linearity and open-world exploration



queen, stripped of his soul following blasphemous experiments with immortality, and intent on revenge on his former people.

Crunch blighted development in those final weeks – people sleeping in the office, and shambling pyjama-clad around the building to get the game finished. Mertens recalls a rebellion during this time over crunch-time dinner being Domino's Pizza every night; eventually this was swapped out for Thai food, boosting both morale and nutritional intake on the team. "The crunch at the time was brutal," Kristjanson recalls. "But it also came with a sense of, 'Well, I own this, so if it's going in it's going in because I'm doing it.' There were less random tasks assigned to whoever was available like you get today."

That sense of ownership was a major motivator to get the game over



the finish line, but some of the team began to lose confidence. "Suddenly the game felt like this hacked-up monstrosity that was still full of bugs," Gaider remembers. "By the time it shipped, I think everybody on the team was like, 'This is going to be horrible.'" *Baldur's Gate II* went gold in August 2000, and then all that was left to do was await the verdict from the gaming public, with not only BioWare's but publisher Interplay's future depending on it. When it launched, *Baldur's Gate II* was indeed a buggy behemoth as anticipated. And yet, despite everything, it was also a resounding triumph.

CONTROLLED CHAOS

Its myriad technical issues were drowned in a sea of quality writing and unrivalled D&D-flavoured adventuring (setting something of a precedent for future buggy-but-

brilliant RPGs such as *The Elder Scrolls* and *Baldur's Gate III*). It set videogame RPGs on the path towards intimate, companion-driven storytelling, and established the BioWare Formula that would find future success in *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age*. Gaider also points out that *Baldur's Gate II* helped bring D&D into the limelight at a time when its popularity was waning. "D&D at the end of the '90s was almost a vanishing concern," he says. "Then in 2000, the 3rd edition and *Baldur's Gate II* came out, which a lot of people said helped its revival."

"To this day, I will ask the gameplay guy, the programmers, the senior guys, 'What do you want to see in this thing?' and write to that," says Kristjanson. "If I'm just telling someone I'm making something, what ownership can they have of that? Ownership is vital to games having a heart to them." *Baldur's Gate II*'s development was like an archipelago where each designer presided over their own set of islands, with ideas and inspiration flowing freely between them. From the Copper Coronet with its seedy underbelly, to the sewers containing cult hideouts, from fetishistically designed Drow cities to the grimy, lively streets of Athkatla, every corner of *Baldur's Gate II* teems with storytelling, told by one talented developer or another determined to leave a bit of themselves in the game.

The final product became a codex that RPG developers refer back to. Not only that, but 25 years on it remains a timeless game; an anthology of D&D stories orbiting around an intimate central plot, all bound together by a visual style that remains so soothing on the eyes even though conventions have long since moved on. Like a masterpiece Romantic painting, its quality shines across the generations. ■

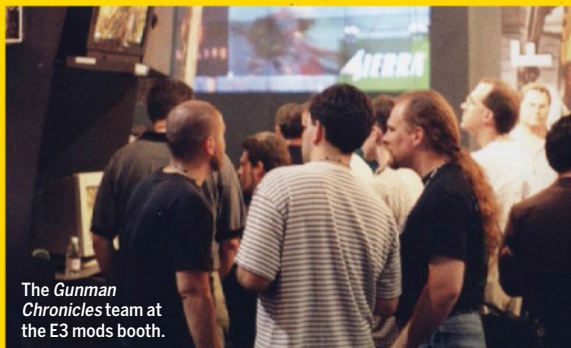
DIGITAL

Whatever happened
to **GUNMAN
CHRONICLES**?
Tracing the
history of Valve's
forgotten shooter

By Rick Lane

FUSSIL

Gunman Chronicles



The *Gunman Chronicles* team at the E3 mods booth.



Flower working on the raptor model for *Gunman Chronicles*.

Recently, I was struck by an overwhelming urge to play *Gunman Chronicles*, the 2000 FPS developed by Valve and Rewolf Software. There was no real trigger for it – this sort of thing happens when you’re nearing 40 and grew up on a diet of ’90s shooters. But if I had to identify the origin of this yearning, it would be dinosaurs.

Gunman Chronicles is an ambitious shooter, a gunslinging sci-fi adventure that transports you to a variety of locations and features programmable weapons – a fairly unique gimmick 25 years on. But my favourite things about it are the dinosaurs. Appearing early in the game, *Gunman*’s terrible lizards have this wonderful, plasticine look that could have come straight from the workshop of Ray Harryhausen. Also, when you shoot the velociraptors with a shotgun, their heads occasionally explode, and exploding heads of any kind will always endear a game to me.

Yet when I opened up Steam to buy *Gunman Chronicles*, I discovered that I couldn’t. This shooter, which I will repeat was created with Valve’s direct involvement, isn’t available on Steam. Indeed, it isn’t available to buy anywhere.

CURIOUS CAT

This got me curious, and after a little digging, I discovered there are other strange elements to *Gunman*’s history. Its co-developer, Rewolf Software, dissolved after the game’s release, while its director, Herbert Flower, has only one other videogame credit on Mobygames, a special thanks for the 2010 Wii game *Hoopworld*.

Gunman Chronicles is a bizarre island in Valve’s early history, one that I felt compelled to chart. And it turns out the tale of *Gunman Chronicles* is almost, but not quite, a Cinderella story. To create it, a group of young, ambitious FPS modders went to the ball, creating a game with the support of the biggest name in PC gaming. But when the carriage ultimately turned back into a pumpkin, there was no prince waiting for them with a glass slipper.

FLOWER POWER

Herbert Flower, variously credited as the director and team lead of *Gunman Chronicles* and who now describes himself as an “entrepreneur,” has been fascinated by computers, and the idea of making games for them, as long as they have existed. “When I was ten, this new thing called computers showed up,” says Flower. “I remember my dad took me to an electronics store, and they showed me the Macintosh. And I’m like, ‘If you can draw circles and lines and you can move that little mouse pointer around, you could make a game out of this, right?’ I was thinking about it the whole time.”

While Flower’s first home computer was a Commodore 64, his arrival into game development begins when he acquired an Atari ST. Using this, he made an online BBS game called *Thieves Guild* with friend and fellow student Paul Witte. “I made the front-end for it that would show you graphics, which was kind of neat for a text game. You’d fight a monster and we’d show it to you.”

Thieves Guild is well-regarded among fans of BBS games, notable for its great art for the time. It didn’t make Flower or Witte much money, however. “We should have been charging the players for the maps,”



SETTING

Gunman Chronicles is set in the distant future, where humanity has expanded into space with an intergalactic colonial empire. There are also space cowboys. Don’t think about it.

PROTECTION

The *Gunman* can suit up in armour to help keep himself vertical, as well as pick up health packs within the world or visit recharging stations. Yes, it’s like *Half-Life*.



Flower says. “Somehow I didn’t notice the business problem of selling one when we could have sold 20.”

Thieves Guild was also late to the party. It was released in 1993, when the Atari ST was in its twilight years and the PC was the hot new gaming machine, propelled to stardom by the launch of *Doom*. “You started to understand how few limitations there were compared to Ataris and Colecovisions and things like that.



CO-DEVELOPER, REWOLF SOFTWARE, DISSOLVED AFTER THE GAME'S RELEASE

GUNS

The Gunman has a wide variety of deadly weapons at his disposal, ranging from shotguns to RPG launchers. Many have alternate fire modes that change how they deal out death.

HOSTILES

Almost everything wants to kill the Gunman, including dinosaurs, corrupt Gunmen, robotic drones, and even genetically engineered aliens.

TEMPERATURE

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You could do so much, and I started getting the idea of modding *Doom*.”

HAND-CRAFTED

The game that would eventually become *Gunman Chronicles* started out as a *Doom* mod. Flower, who worked in an auto body shop, would physically craft his own textures for the mod, importing them into the game using a gadget called a Snappy, which could capture full colour

images of video input. “I would take a piece of cardboard and glue on a whole ton of parts, machine parts and parts from pens and bottle caps,” Flower says. “I’d paint it up and make miniature techno walls and cool things.” Enemy models were likewise hand-crafted and imported via photographs, similar to how Adrian Carmack created the demons in *Doom*. “If you want to make a dinosaur, you could just

make it out of clay and pose it [and] photograph it.”

Through this approach, Flower says he ended up with a *Doom* mod that was “way better looking than anything on the market”. But graphics technology was evolving at lightspeed in the '90s, and like John Romero in his *Ion Storm* days, Flower found himself drawn to every new engine that came out. He ported his mod to both the Build engine and

VALVE BROUGHT THE ENTIRE GUNMAN TEAM, WHICH INCLUDED MODDERS FROM ITALY, UKRAINE AND GERMANY, TOGETHER



the *Quake* engine, before finally settling upon *Half-Life*'s GoldSrc engine as its technical basis.

MULTIPLE VOLUNTEERS

Through this period, *Gunman* grew from a solo project to one involving multiple volunteers. Flower says the team were all 16-17 and based all across the globe, with design coordinated via ICQ. Flower dubbed his diffuse studio Rewolf, his own surname spelled backward.

"One of the guys, Raniere [Banninga], he lived on a boat. His family was from South Africa, and so he would [leave] certain ports, disappear for two weeks, appear at a different port. I actually had to send him a copy of *Half-Life*." The project also began to formally coalesce as *Gunman*, though Flower says it was originally titled *Gunmanship 101* and was conceived as a PVP shooter,



very different from the final, singleplayer experience.

By this point, Flower was running short on money. He'd cut down his work hours to focus on the mod, ultimately moving back in with his

parents. "I was poor", he says. "I remember I lost my shoes. My dad put them in a box and I never could find him. And I went to the mall in my mud boots. I felt like a douche." According to Flower, it was around

FORGOTTEN PERSON SHOOTER

Three other FPS games that are now lost to the sands of time



NO ONE LIVES FOREVER 2000

Scoring a high 84% on review, *No One Lives Forever* remains a slick mix of Bond-style spy action, 1960s style, and plenty of genre-defying humour.



PREY 2006

A sci-fi FPS romp following Cherokee Domasi Tawodi as he, his girlfriend and his grandfather are abducted by aliens. There are portals, gravity shifts, spirit walks, and guns, lots of guns.



THE DARKNESS 2007

When night falls, Jackie Estacado can harness the demonic power of the Darkness, an ancient demonic entity that has inhabited Jackie's bloodline for generations.



The *Gunman Chronicles* team together.

this time that Banninga, *Gunman*'s lead modeller and animator "took matters into his own hands" and contacted Valve. "He approached Valve and said, 'Hey, save us!'"

And Valve did. Flower says the *Half-Life* developer gave the *Gunman* team "20 grand" and a bunch of milestones to meet. Banninga left his parent's boat and moved in with Flower, and they continued developing *Gunman*, working out of Flower's parents' basement. After "about a year" of working like this, Valve made another offer – to come out to Seattle and work on the game all in one place.

Valve brought the entire *Gunman* team, which included modders from Italy, Ukraine and Germany, together in Seattle, with the team living together in two "hotel-type apartments". In the mornings, the

team would cram into Flower's "little van with iffy brakes" and head over to Valve HQ, where they'd work on *Gunman* in office space organised by Gabe Newell. "Gabe had rented some space below the main office level in his little office tower, and we had a few rooms," Flower says.

TASK MASTER

For Flower and the team, it seemed like a dream come true. But Flower was unprepared for Newell's plan to get *Gunman* finished. "He assigned one of his guys to put the whip to us," Flower says. "We'd get home at two in the morning, back to our apartments, and then go back to work." After a fortnight of this routine, Newell assessed the game's progress. "Gabe's like, 'You know what? I think you guys need more than two weeks.'"

Rewolf ended up stationed at Valve for two and a half months. Flower says that Newell regularly engaged with the *Gunman* project, with the pair speaking every day. The extent to which Valve was involved in the design of the project is less clear, however. According to *Gunman*'s Wikipedia page, Valve placed Jeff Lane, new to the studio at the time, on the project as a mapper. Flower disputes this, saying that Valve's only personnel contribution was a QA tester the Rewolf team referred to as "the game Nazi".

"We loved him. His job was to break your game," Flower says. "He would do things you didn't expect. He was the most valuable thing we ever had from Valve, I'll tell you, aside from the free caffeine."

PUNISHING SCHEDULE

Indeed, while Flower fully understood the opportunity laid out for him and the *Gunman* team, his time at Valve was not quite the magical experience he'd hoped for. This was partly down to the punishing schedule they had to keep to, but Flower also says that a rift developed between Newell and himself. "My relationship with Gabe didn't really go that great," he says. "It's not like we hated each other. It's like two people with bad breath. We're like, 'OK, can't wait to get out of the room with this guy.'"

From his perspective, Flower believes Valve didn't give Rewolf a big enough slice of *Gunman*'s royalties. "Gabe didn't get rich by giving away money," he says. "We had avoided having publishers because we really didn't want to get that 10% of the sale price. We wanted to get more than 10%, and I think we ended up with 11% through Valve." It's worth specifying here that Valve





The Valve and Sierra mods booth.



Flower hiking with his goat and German shepherd in Utah

didn't publish *Gunman*. This was handled by Sierra Studios, which had also published *Half-Life*. But Flower says all his agreements were made with Newell, while Valve negotiated with Sierra separately.

"Normally, publishers get this huge 90% [of royalties] and Valve just used their power to say, 'You get 50%, not 90.' And I was like, 'Awesome, Valve can recoup anything they've invested times whatever, but we'll maybe do OK.' And now we get 11% or something."

SOUL REAVER

Flower says realising the cut Rewolf Software would get "threw water on the flame of my soul at that point," particularly when he had to break the news to the Rewolf Software team. "We hadn't even discussed how we were splitting up the take," he says. "There's a dozen people, and some are more important than others, and like, who wants to hear that they're going to get 4% of 11%? I think I only got 11% myself, and I was the guy running the whole thing and who had no shoes at some point."

After two-and-a-half months at Valve, *Gunman Chronicles* finally went gold, and Rewolf wrapped up its work on the project. "It was anticlimactic," Flower says. "There was no big party. We were burned out, and the team kind of just faded off as they [went] home. [We were] dropping people off at the airport, good friends I might keep in touch with, but never see in person again."

Gunman Chronicles launched on November 21, 2000, and received mixed reviews from critics, which is still a sore point with Flower. "When you see reviews and they're like, 'Oh, this game is too much like *Half-Life*!' And you're like, 'What, the best game that you ever rated? Too much like

that, huh?'" The game sold relatively well, although Flower says he "didn't get rich" off his cut. "I probably could have made as much money painting cars, as far as take-home money. But royalties are taxed at a lower rate, so it spent pretty good."

DESERT WARRIOR

Gunman wasn't the end of Flower's game development career. After recovering from the burnout induced by the project, he joined back up with his high-school friend Paul Witte to form Mythyn Interactive, creating the *Ultima Online*-inspired MMO *Linkrealms*. Unfortunately, the project ended up being as anticlimactic as *Gunman*, only stretched over a much

longer period. "We were just so underfunded and understaffed, two or three people trying to make one of the most complicated pieces of software," Flower says. "I spent ten years on that project. There's nothing worse than being an entrepreneur and failing slowly."

Flower doesn't know why *Gunman Chronicles* isn't on Steam, but assumes it has something to do with a rights issue between Valve and Vivendi (which merged with Activision in 2008 to form Activision Blizzard). "I don't know what's going on," he says. "We did, with Valve, say we get first right of refusal if they want to make a sequel, so that we could do it. And some years later we

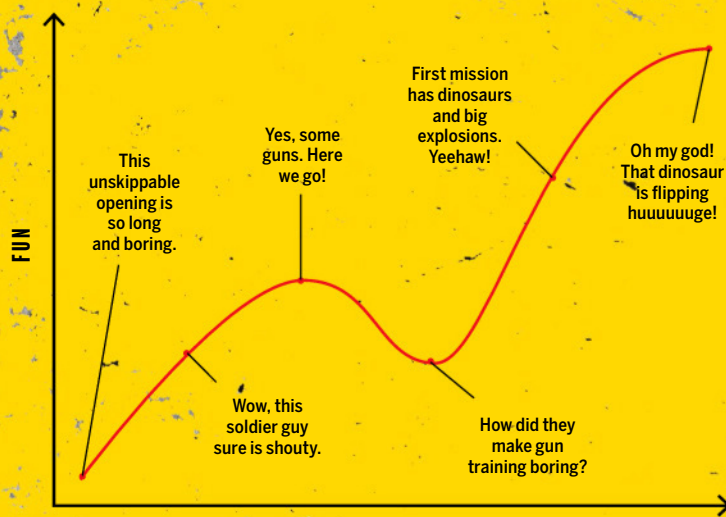


THE GAME LAUNCHED ON NOVEMBER 21, 2000, AND RECEIVED MIXED REVIEWS FROM CRITICS



GUNMAN CHRONICLE

Your opening hour playing this forgotten FPS...



asked, 'Hey, would you care if we started fiddling with this kind of thing?' and got a hard, 'No, don't.'"

TEXTURE PACKS

While many of Rewolf Software's developers have gone on to work at other companies in the game industry, Flower is no longer involved with game development directly. Instead, he runs a photogrammetry business creating texture packs for game engines like Unity.

The business is named Goatogrammetry after the pack goats that carry Flower's equipment while hiking in the Utah desert. "I love to explore the world, right? Go out in the desert. I'll take my packing goats, the German shepherd, and just, you know, you go out and you see this stuff," he says. "Nothing like going on a hike and coming back with 100 bucks worth of photographs." ■

REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Utterly broken or offensively bad; no value.

Example *Big Brother*, *Mad Dog McCree*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

Example *Skull Island: Rise of Kong*, *ShellShock: Nam '67*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

Examples *Underworld Ascendant*, *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort.

Examples *Sonic: Lost World*, *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare III*, *Redfall*, *Lego Horizon Adventures*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed especially well.

Examples *Minecraft Legends*, *Senua's Saga: Hellblade II*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

Examples *New World*, *Skull and Bones*, *Forspoken*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

Examples *Deep Rock Galactic*, *Star Wars Outlaws*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments. We love it.

Examples *Age of Wonders 4*, *Helldivers II*

90%-94% Important to PC gaming and ahead of its time.

Examples *Elden Ring*, *Factorio*, *Balatro*

95%-98% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

Examples *Baldur's Gate 3*, *Minecraft*, *Metaphor: ReFantazio*

99%-100% Advances the human species. Provides a transcendent feeling not dissimilar to the ending of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*.



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

Find out more
www.bit.ly/pcgreviews



Beast mode

Two games reviewed this month tap into the more animalistic parts of our gaming brains, I think.

The first, as shown off in *Dying Light: The Beast*, is the raw pleasure to be found in 'Hulking out' and causing huge amounts of damage and chaos in games, leaving enemies and debris strewn in your unstoppable wake. It sure is satisfying decapitating zombies with an electrified machete or running them down in a 4x4.

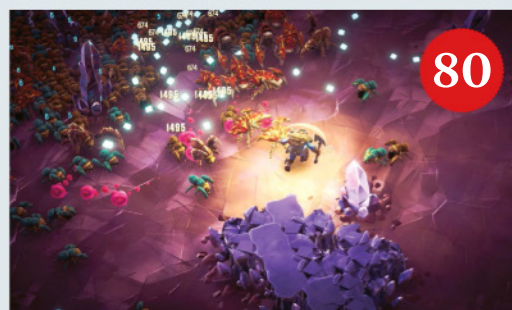
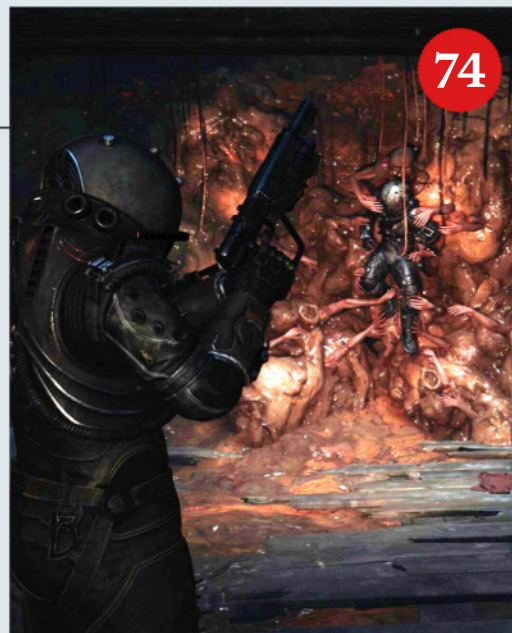
The second, as evidenced in *Borderlands 4*, is the addictive joy of watching numbers go up in games. The positive feedback loop generated is often incredibly satisfying, regardless of what you're doing or how simple it may be.

As a result, these two games aren't perfect, but they sure are thrilling.

R. Jones

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**LET US KNOW
 WHAT YOU THINK**
 Email us via letters@pcgamer.com with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer



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This month's beastly reviewers...



CHRISTOPHER LIVINGSTON
Specialist in
Activating Beast Mode
Currently playing
Dying Light: The Beast
This month
Rampaged around
PC Gamer Towers in
search of Jelly Babies.



TYLER COLP
Specialist in
Magic mushrooms
Currently playing
Hollow Knight: Silksong
This month
Hung out with his
eccentric insect friends
in a mystical kingdom.
Which was nice.



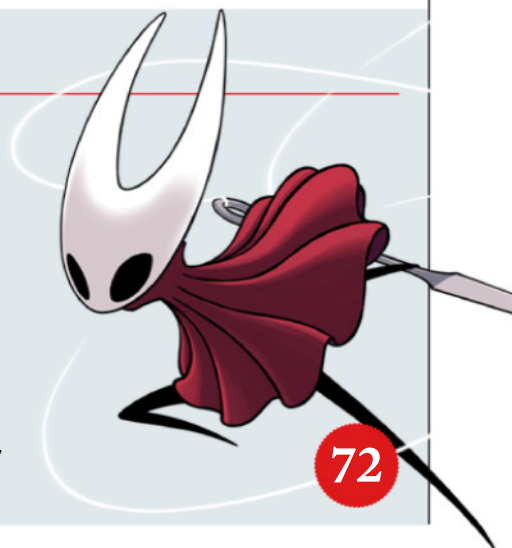
ELIE GOULD
Specialist in
Killing things with fire
Currently playing
Cronos: The New Dawn
This month
Filled a jerrycan with
petrol and disappeared
into the night. Call us if
you see a large blaze.



HARVEY RANDALL
Specialist in
Numberwang
Currently playing
Borderlands 4
This month
Watched numbers go
up while watching
frames go down. That's
modern gaming, right?



MATT ELLIOTT
Specialist in
Courtroom antics
Currently playing
Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney Trilogy
This month
Found himself in court,
once again, for crimes
against fashion.



KYLE TRIALS

Kyle Crane is out for revenge in **DYING LIGHT: THE BEAST**

By Christopher Livingston

Punching a man's head clean off his shoulders with a single swing of my fist is darn satisfying. It's not like *Dying Light: The Beast* needed to make me super-strong – I regularly launch zombies off rooftops with my two-footed flying kick and slice enemies in half lengthwise with an electrified machete I built in my bedroom – but I do appreciate the opportunity to hulk out with a bare-handed decapitation every so often.

This time around, Techland's zombie parkour horror is going to the country, and the setting isn't the only thing that's changed. *Dying Light: The Beast* swaps the dense skyscraper

forest of the last game, *Stay Human*, for a quaint village nestled in a rural landscape, and dispenses with a lot of the bells and whistles.

No more claiming sections of the city for factions, or setting up networks of two-way ziplines and jump pads, or soaring through the air with a paraglider. Even though it adds a bit of super-human strength to the mix, the zany parkour sandbox has been toned down to resemble a purer survival horror experience.

KYLE STYLE

Thing is: I'm a bells and whistles kinda guy. I loved transforming the city in *Stay Human* into my own jungle gym, but you can't give me a bunch of toys in one game and then take them all away in the next one.

Remember how the movie *Alien* had one alien, and then *Aliens* had a ton of aliens, and then *Alien 3* went back to one alien again? I wasn't a fan of that, either. To put it in parkour parlance, *Dying Light: The Beast* is more grounded, but winds up a little flat-footed as a result.

Kyle Crane, the gruff, selfless do-gooder of the original *Dying Light* is back, and boy is he angry. Also, boy is he occasionally a superhuman monster. Poor KC spent the last dozen years being tortured in a lab by an evil dude named The Baron, who injected him with various zombie

serums that means Kyle can now lose his shit and summon monster-like strength for short periods of time.

Now that Kyle's free of his prison, he wants revenge on The Baron, who

rules the zombie-filled valley of Castor Woods with a private army.

But would you believe it: the first nice person Kyle meets in Castor Woods immediately injects him with more zombie fluids. Kyle is unhappy

about this, but only briefly. You'd think someone who had spent more than a decade being stabbed with zombie needles would under no

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An open-world first-person parkour horror (parkorror?) game

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Techland

PUBLISHER
Techland

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7 9700K, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 4070 Ti

MULTIPLAYER
Co-op

LINK
dyinglightgame.com

circumstances allow themselves to be stabbed with more needles, but he's told injecting gross infectious gunk into his arm will make him stronger. "Fine," Kyle says, immediately capitulating to continued injections of untested zombie fluids.

That's just how Kyle Crane rolls, folks: he's a one-dimensional hero who always does the most noble and badass thing for people he's known for no more than a few minutes, whether that means swimming through a flooded power plant in the dark or investigating a noise in a sewer filled with monsters or slamming zombie juice into his veins because it'll make him jump higher.

And that's OK! I'm not here for the writing or characters or logic, I'm here to climb buildings and kick zombies off those buildings and craft a baseball bat that does both flame and shock damage. Techland thoughtfully made a 'skip' button available during every single line of every conversation in *Dying Light: The Beast*. I smash it often.

MAP QUEST

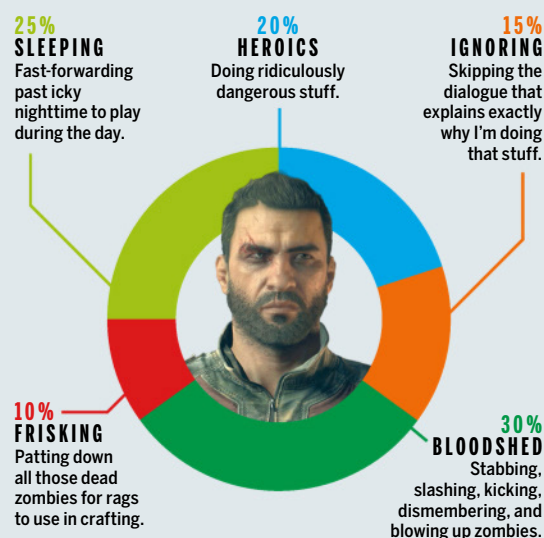
One of my biggest concerns was that *The Beast*, which was originally planned as DLC for *Stay Human*, was going to feel like an expansion and not a full game. I'm happy to say I don't get that feeling, except, well, I do get that feeling a little bit, sometimes. It's most noticeable in the first half of the game, which has a real shortage of sidequests – despite your main hideout being packed with NPCs, very few of them have anything for you to do and mostly stand around talking about how awesome Kyle Crane is. Once you've unlocked a second HQ midway through the game, there are a bunch more multi-part sidequests to keep you busy when you want a break from the main story.

Castor Woods itself doesn't feel like an expansion either, because it's a big ol' map. Probably a bit too big, honestly. Without a huge, modern

Toned down to resemble a purer survival horror experience

ZOMBIE O'CLOCK

How my Kyle spends his time

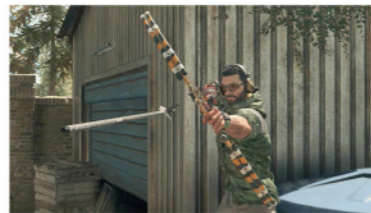


I don't think that
gas mask worked.

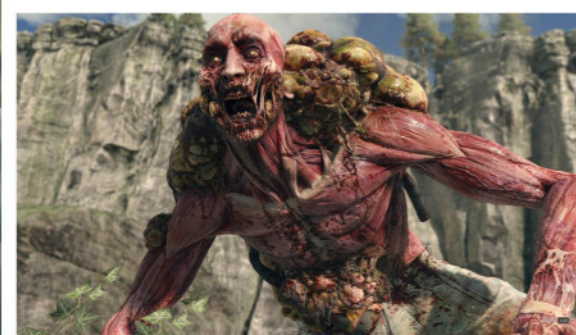


FAR LEFT: Running
over zombies in a
truck isn't as fun as I
thought it would be.

LEFT: Rescue
survivors and
get a reward.



No skyscrapers,
but there are a few
high perches.



RIGHT: Shotgun acquired. Now it's a zombie game.

BELOW: Gross in all the best ways.



city to traverse you can't do all that much rooftop freerunning before you run out of rooftop, and I spent a lot of time making trips back and forth, not just through the town but through industrial areas and farmland and forests where there's not much to climb and jump around on. (There are trucks you can drive, but they're slow and can't be customised, nothing like the vehicle from *Dying Light's The Following* expansion, if that's what you were hoping to see again.)

PARKOUR!

Even on a smaller scale, though, *The Beast's* parkour is still engaging, and there are at least a few decent climbing puzzles socked away here and there around the map: a power station with a single distant open window, a clock tower that needs to be scaled to connect an electrical cable, and a pair of towering industrial smokestacks with just enough bricks missing to create a subtle path of handholds that lead you to the top. I just wish there were more properly tall stuff to climb – what's here is fine, but can't match the exhilaration of some of the really big climbing puzzles of *Stay Human*.

The Beast is a very videogamey videogame, and I mean that as a compliment. To unleash my beast powers, which is called going into Beast Mode, I have to fill my Beast Meter by doing damage or even just taking damage (Techland really, really wants you to fill your Beast Meter so you can try it out).

To unlock new Beast Skills I have to collect, you guessed it: Beast Points. If Techland didn't at least try to put together a promotion with MrBeast for this game, I'd be very surprised indeed.

And I love Beast Mode. Briefly I can become more of a monster than the monsters I'm fighting, plunging my arm through one zombie's torso, popping another's head like a balloon between my palms, ripping an arm off another and skewering him with it.

I never found much practical use for some of my beast skills, like

my super jump, and one called Hook Thrust that lets me fling my grappling hook and then quickly yoink myself over to whatever it sunk into (you know, the way a beast uses a grappling hook). But it's fun to do these things anyway, to forget about stamina bars and health meters for a bit and just let loose with raw carnage. And yeah, while fighting a room full of The Baron's soldiers, I punched one dude's head clean off. Zero complaints.

BEASTLY

The gore, even when I'm not using Beast Mode, is extremely well done, with lots of fun and gross animations and deformations. I swung a club at one zombie and its lower jaw went flying off, then I smashed a hole in its sternum, then shattered its leg. When it fell, another zombie lunged at me and briefly tripped over the body of the one I'd just knocked down. I cut another zombie's arm off with a blade

and it held up its stump, looked at it for a moment as if mildly surprised, then continued shambling at me. Then I knocked the top of its skull off and saw its wet brain. A+, would brutalise the undead again.

Fighting humans: also decent. The Baron's soldiers aren't overly smart, especially the idiots with axes or tonfas (I have never seen so many tonfas in a game) who just charge right at me and die. But after hours of zombie-smashing, I appreciated the sequences where I could just go bananas with shotguns and SMGs against the military and armed bandits. Screw parkour, at least for a few minutes: I've got a sniper rifle now.

BOSSY BOOTS

The premise of boss fights in *Dying Light* is a good one: there are extra-baddie zombies The Baron has cooked up in his lab and unleashed for testing, and to gain new beast powers you need to hunt these bosses down and defeat them, then inject their goo into your body.

But it turns out you don't do much hunting: an NPC usually just calls you on the radio and tells you where they are. Worse, the bosses themselves aren't particularly interesting, coming in one of two flavours: big or fast.

Big ones do the kind of things big ones do, like throw rocks and ground-pound, and fast ones speed around and jump at you and then speed away again. The least interesting boss is just a big, growling pile of hit points, and that's the one that's trotted out multiple times during the game.

It took me about 35 hours to complete the main story of *Dying Light: The Beast*, and I've still got a bunch of sidequests I never did, treasure maps I didn't hunt down, and activities like mini power stations and safe houses I didn't complete. I'm happy it's big enough that it doesn't just feel like a padded-out expansion: with a couple exceptions, *The Beast* feels like a proper, full-on game. It's just not as good of a game as the last one. ■

CRANE GANG

Here are the important people Crane befriends



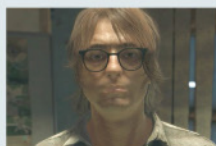
OLIVIA

A scientist who can help Kyle gain new Beast powers by tracking down monsters.



THE SHERIFF

She runs the survivor colony in Castor Woods, but she needs your help too.



UH... DAVE, MAYBE?

I honestly don't remember his name. I did a quest for him, though.



BITEY

He growls a lot and is always grabbing me. Wait, he's not a friend. He's a z-z-z-zombie!



PC GAMER VERDICT

A more gritty survival horror than *Stay Human*, but Techland's new parkour horror game stumbles a bit.

70

BRILLI-ANT

HOLLOW KNIGHT: SILKSONG proves that there is pleasure in pain

By Tyler Colp

Nothing prepared me for the Sisyphean exercise that is playing *Hollow Knight: Silksong*. Part of that is my bad for skipping the original *Hollow Knight* – I thought I'd have plenty of time to try it before *Silksong* ever actually came out. But now it's here and I've spent over 25 hours with the videogame equivalent of sticking your hand into the Dune pain box.

Silksong may be one of the most painful 2D action games I've played, and the worst part? I inflicted that pain on myself by pressing forward until I'd seen just about every inch of the bug-inhabited land of Pharloom.

I may be bruised and sore from the experience, but I'm happy to say that for all the pain *Silksong* put me through, it was worth it.

As much as I find the term inadequate for describing what's truly special about *Silksong*, calling it a Soulslike has some merit. Combat-wise it doesn't quite fit, but the construction of Pharloom rivals (and echoes) that of Lordran in *Dark Souls*. Not only is it intricate and interconnected, but it's warped by its tragic history. You can open the map and draw a line from the golden citadel all the way down into the stagnant, maggot-infested pools of Bilewater to understand exactly where the rot began.

SECRET AREAS

Every shortcut and secret area contextualises the horrors you face in the bigger, sadder picture. A pristine dining room in the upper chambers of the citadel hides a kitchen caked in dust and decay, and just below that, in a secret room, lies the tangled corpse of a centipede pontiff. There's always something just out of view or lingering in the background that draws your eye, and those details always kept me hungry to see more. By the end of the game, I couldn't tell what was more exciting: the fact that I somehow dug my way into an entire zone I hadn't explored yet or

the questions that new area raised about what's really going on with Pharloom's biggest mysteries.

Hornet, and the characters she runs into, are a splash of cold water in this gloomy dream. The thrill of playing as Hornet is what really anchors *Silksong* as a brilliant action game above all else. Skipping and dodging around enemies becomes a delicate dance that grows more and more intricate as you pick up

new moves. I was merely poking at enemies in the first few hours of the game and by the end I was tossing out spike traps and silk missiles while

bouncing between bugs like a pinball. When I wasn't getting clobbered, it felt like the tables had turned and suddenly I was the boss with the unfair, unpredictable attacks.

RISK AND REWARD

Most of *Silksong* is fair despite being unrelenting, and I suspect playing it in a compressed amount of time exacerbated the moments of pain. At the same time, there are sections, particularly the ones you're forced to repeat every time you attempt a boss, that threaten to curdle. One of the worst ones shows up near the beginning and forces you to pogo your way past worms just to have a chance at seeing the boss again.

Silksong doesn't always get the balance between effort and reward right. Some games will make you find an access code to unlock a safe with a key in it – *Silksong* will make you fight with your bare fists through four waves of flies with crowbars to get a key that unlocks a door leading to more flies with crowbars. You're not even guaranteed to get anything after defeating a boss. For the first half, you'll be lucky to find a bench to rest on that isn't trying to kill you or take your money.

I may be bruised and sore from the experience, but I'm happy to say that it does, in fact, pay off. There were frustrating points in *Silksong* where I was reluctant to hand it to Team Cherry, but I'm still processing the shock that it managed to exceed my expectations after listening to people scream about *Hollow Knight* over the last seven years. I can't tell you if the hype was worth it. But I can tell you that *Silksong* glows with a level of precision and imagination that's hard to find anywhere else. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A 2D action game with challenging combat and platforming

EXPECT TO PAY
£16.75

DEVELOPER
Team Cherry

PUBLISHER
Team Cherry

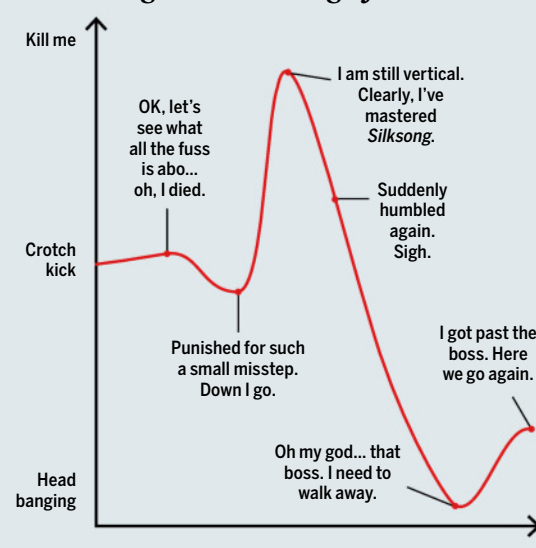
REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i9 12900K,
32GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 5090

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
steam.pm/
app/1030300

A delicate dance that grows more and more intricate

PAIN FACTOR

A newbie's guide to *Silksong*'s first hour

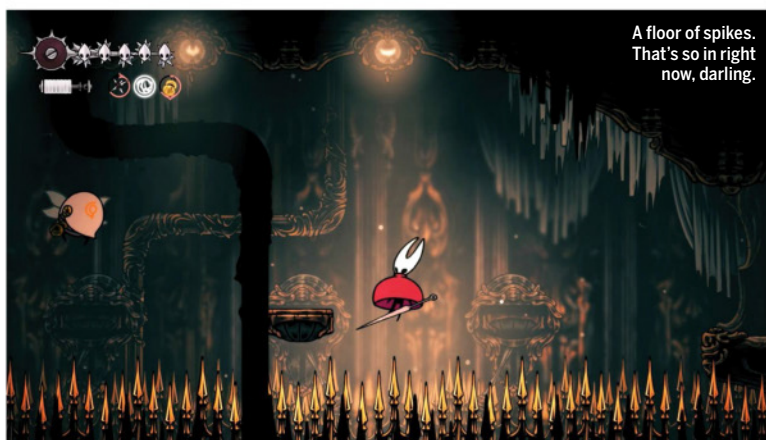
PC GAMER VERDICT

Hollow Knight: Silksong can be ruthless, but it's hard to pry yourself away from its haunted little world.

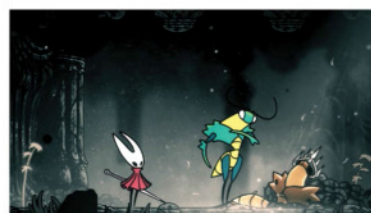
90

Hornet wields a needle and thread with deadly prowess.

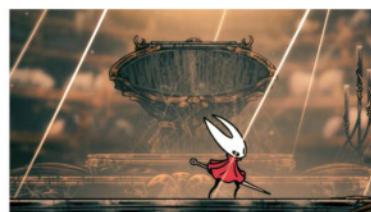
Where do you hide this boundless strength you claim, spider?
I've watched your struggle towards us. Yours was a painful,
broken trek. One needs grace to stand before the divine.



A floor of spikes.
That's so in right
now, darling.



UPPER LEFT: A painful, broken trek? Yep, that's progress in *Silksong*.



LEFT: The designs of the various insects that inhabit Pharloom are full of character.



This big guy just wants a high four from Hornet.

KILL IT WITH FIRE

CRONOS has some moments of charm, but they aren't enough to outweigh the lows

By Elie Gould

I love a good horror game, even if my frayed nerves really don't. And not just any old jumpscare-filled adventure, but a properly terrifying experience that'll send shivers down my spine and keep me awake at night for weeks to come. So I was looking forward to jumping headfirst into Bloober Team's new survival horror game *Cronos: The New Dawn* and seeking out its grotesque zombie-like oddities named Orphans, vile medical horrors, and some confusing and tension-filled time-travel horror.

Unfortunately, I often find that survival horror delivers weaker frights. Monsters just don't seem that scary when I'm piled high with guns, ammo, and every single explosive I can get my hands on. So, in this respect, I want the survival horror games I play to excel in different areas, like having a solid crafting system, engaging fights, and a gripping story. And while the crafting system in *Cronos* was good, its fights felt repetitive, and its story didn't get to the point fast enough.

Cronos' monsters are of the kind that just kind of amble around or hugely telegraph their big swings or sprints. You can also usually hear the zombies before you see them. Couple this with just how frustrating it can be to deal with waves of Orphans, and these enemies lose almost all of their fear factor.

ZOMBIES

But there's no escaping these zombies. You traverse the abandoned district of Nowa Huta, years after a zombie outbreak in the steelworks spread like wildfire and engulfed the city. Now, all that's left is decaying infrastructure, tons of Orphans, and time anomalies that are slowly breaking down what's left of the city, which you can use to travel back in time to the moment of the outbreak.

Another gripe is how *Cronos* auto-saves so often that sometimes it can mire you in impossible situations. I ran into several instances where I got killed just

after a checkpoint and then respawned right where I died. With my health just as low as before, this meant I'd die to one hit again when

I came back, trapping me in an endless loop of falling to the same enemy over and over. The only way forward is to reload to an earlier point and go at it again, fresh.

In a game that otherwise stresses the importance of restraint and holding on to your items, some of the Orphans can be a massive drain on resources. In one fight against a particularly huge Orphan, I went through every shred of ammo on me, plus everything that was lying around the boss room, and still didn't manage to take it down.

Eventually, I went back to a safe room and spent everything on making yet more bullets and mini-explosives. This eventually took

An endless loop of falling to the same enemy over and over

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A survival horror game with time travel and zombies set in the Nowa Huta district of Kraków

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Bloober Team

PUBLISHER
Bloober Team SA

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 5 5600G,
16GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 3070

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
steam.pm/
app/2101960

it down, but it set me back to square one after I had worked so hard to scrimp and save resources together over the preceding hours.

In amongst all that, however, there are moments of beauty, and I'm not just talking about the fantastic setting of Nowa Huta and the incredible apocalyptic scenery of the destroyed district marred by zombies and anomalies. Where *Cronos* gets truly engaging is in the puzzles you solve to progress through its ruined world.

TEMPORAL DISTURBANCES

There are temporal disturbances scattered throughout the map that you can interact with using an extension added to each of your guns. Aiming and firing at them will see parts of the map rewind through time into previous forms. You can use this to rebuild bridges, restore a destroyed roof so you can climb onto it, or move broken chunks of floating earth that have been ripped apart by time anomalies to and from other large areas of land.

Then there's the gravity boots, which you pick up about halfway through the game. These are so much fun to use, allowing you to walk up walls and on ceilings while jumping across huge craters from one launch pad to another. Navigating these areas is so intuitive that it really becomes second nature, despite the unusual movement. I loved it all so much that it had me wishing *Cronos* was a survival puzzle game rather than survival horror.

But these puzzles can only take the game so far. I wish I could say that I had a better time with *Cronos*, but the highs just weren't high enough, or occurred often enough, to weigh out the frustrating lows. ■

CRONOS' CATS

Furry friends you can find



BORÓWKA
I found Borówka running around outside near the apartment buildings. Stay safe out there, little buddy.



CYNAMON
This little lady was stuck in a room, so I opened the door for her, and she gave me an upgrade core!

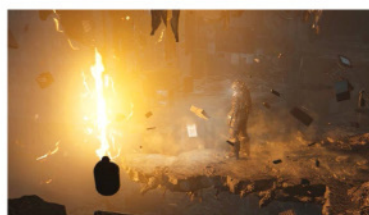
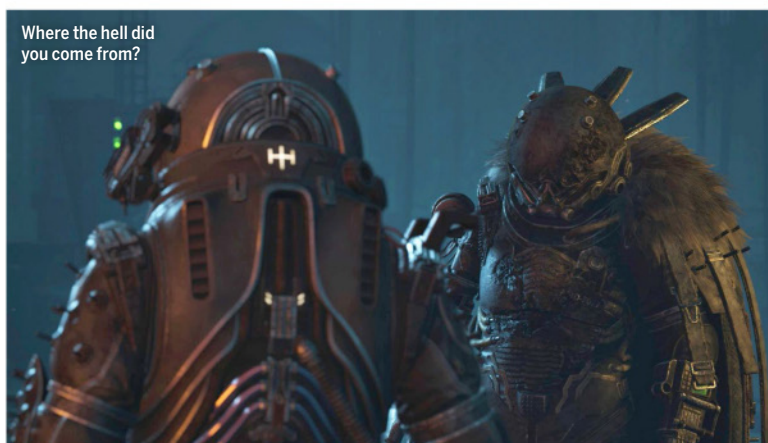
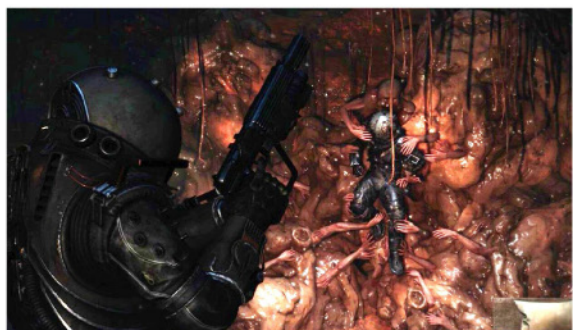


MERLIN
A sweet cat that I found lurking around the stairs near the Terminal. He gave me a health pack, thank you, Merlin.

PC GAMER VERDICT

The scariest part is the frustrating combat, and while it boasts some cool puzzles, they're not enough to save it.

58



ABOVE: Fussing a cat: 10/10 experience.

LEFT: I shouldn't touch that... unless...



FUN & GUN(S)

BORDERLANDS 4 is so good, even a bad UI can't ruin it

By Harvey Randall

Borderlands 4 might just be the best game in the whole 16-year-old series, but trapped in a prison of terrible choices. This, however, didn't stop me from losing 47 hours of my life to a blissfully loot-driven blur. This leads me to two conclusions: Either my brain is truly broken, or the core loop in Borderlands 4's clunky heart is seriously that strong.

This is not a series that innovates, and I don't think Gearbox has reinvented the wheel here, either. What the studio has done is make the perfect wheel, then presumably gone, "Crap, we spent all our budget on a wheel," and put it on a clunky used car with steering that keeps locking up.

I make this assumption because the game's most glaring issues are such blunders that I simply cannot fathom how they happened – they are baffling. And yet, I've never felt so utterly absorbed by a game I have so many nitpicks with. But before I air my grievances, let's get onto the good.

GOT MY TEMPO

The ARPG loop at the core of Borderlands 4 has cast a spell on me. In fact, it's downright trancelike. The game's new open-world structure

marries so well with the shoot, loot, repeat treadmill that I'm shocked it's taken Gearbox so long to do it.

I wasn't sure about it at first. Opening the big map of Kairos immediately struck me with Ubisoft fatigue. No one likes looking at a to-do list, and Borderlands 4 has one of the longest. But the more I played, the more I realised that Gearbox has spent five whole games kinda wasting its time. The more

traditional ARPG levels of the series' past were shackles weighing the whole thing down.

I spent the early game of Borderlands 4 getting sidelined. I'd keep telling myself I'd do the story. "I'll just do this one objective," I'd say, veering off the straight and narrow. Then three hours later I'd wake up, three sidequests, six objectives and two levels deep into distraction.

I've never felt so absorbed by a game I have so many nitpicks with

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The latest looter-shooter by Gearbox Software, in which you run, gun, and grind your way across the prison planet Kairos

EXPECT TO PAY
£60

DEVELOPER
Gearbox Software

PUBLISHER
2K Games

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 7 5800, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3060

MULTIPLAYER
Up to 4-player co-op

LINK
borderlands.2k.com/
borderlands-4

Keeping tempo under all of that is what makes games like *Diablo* and *Path of Exile* so gripping. You turn hordes of enemies into paste, pick up an armoury of loot, head back to base to sell most of it, rinse and repeat until your eyes are bleary and you realise you haven't drunk water in five hours. It's one of the strongest dopamine treadmills I've experienced. The pure, distilled essence of 'number go up'.

This is helped by the fact the story mostly gets out of the way of the shooting. I won't dwell on it because there's not much to dwell on – it's incredibly serviceable with a couple of bright moments and some fun character work, while the cutscenes are nicely animated and help breathe life into its cast. The post-*Borderlands 3* course correction has, in fact, fixed its heading. Pats on the back for everyone. As for the rest of the game's design, it's either incredibly solid, or a complete and utter shambling mess.

FRAMES FOR THE WICKED

Borderlands 4 isn't a game that runs well, no matter what Randy Pitchford says. My first hours of the game were marred with constant stuttering and slowdowns – at one point, the game struggled to stream in its textures so much it ground to a literal halt.

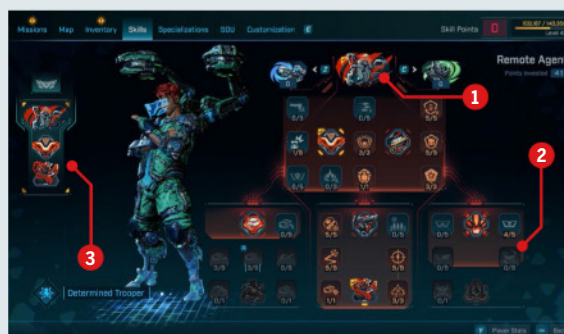
Some of this has been alleviated – Gearbox released a patch on the game's first weekend that helped considerably, and setting my Nvidia card's shader cache to 100GB nixed the problem entirely. Even then, I cannot say the game ran well.

Granted, I am below the recommended specs: I have an RTX 3060, not a 3080. I have 16 gigs of RAM, not 32 – but I believe our hardware team, other players and most of the people begging Pitchford to please stop posting through it when they say that the game runs like garbage on a range of machines from low to high.

As for bugs, I encountered a couple. One issue appeared with the

SO MANY BUILDS

These trees rock



1 ACTION MAN

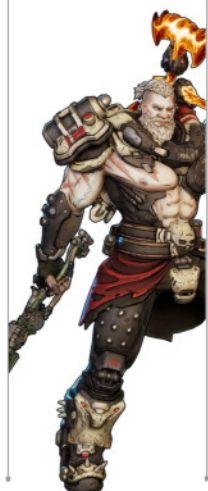
Pick an action skill, the bread to your build sandwich.

2 BRANCH OUT

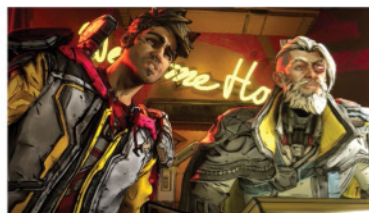
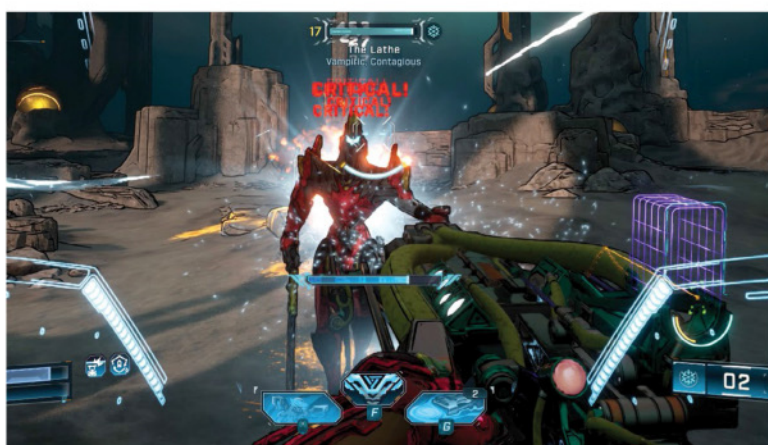
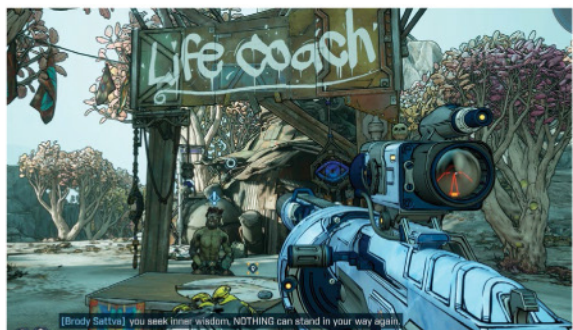
Pick a skill-tree branch – each tree has three.

3 MIX & MATCH

Modify your action skill with an augment and a capstone.



They're about to drop the hottest mixtape.



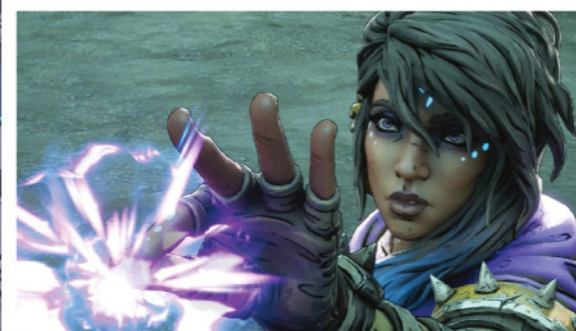
FAR LEFT: The Lathe is my future wrestler name.

LEFT: An accurate representation of me after my tenth frame stutter.

BELOW: Bosses are a step up, with MMO-like mechanics.

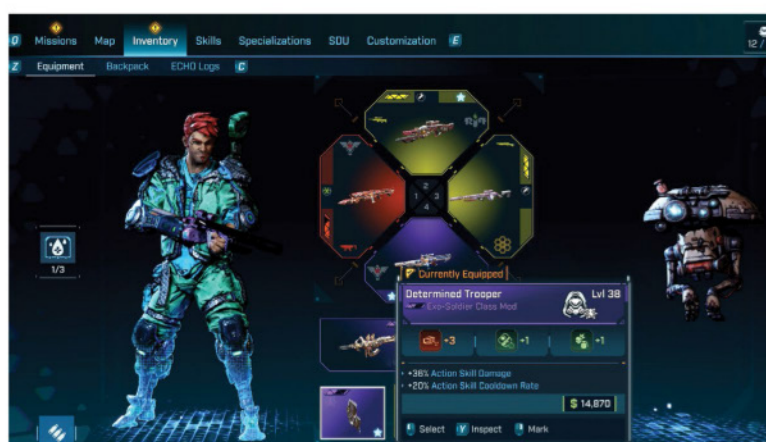
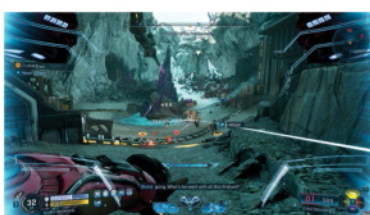
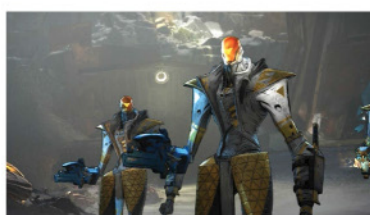


Bosses are a step up, with MMO-like mechanics.



RIGHT: The new faction, The Order, is full of creepy synth.

BELOW: Legendary gear has big build implications.



game's level scaling – sometimes, it'll just hurl overlevelled enemies at you, as it did for me in its final act, randomly pitting me against level 42 foes when I was a measly level 38. I managed to overcome this by simply pushing ahead, and when I got to the next instanced area, everything was scaled to my actual level again.

But my real problems aren't to do with the frames or scaling issues – I can deal with choppy waters if the boat's nice – they're to do with a UI so poorly conceived it has to be some kind of practical joke. *BL4*'s backpack screen, for instance, is basically useless.

DEEP BREATH

Equipped items aren't listed first, and are marked by a tiny tick that's easy to miss. You have to press a separate button to compare your loot. Everything's organised in an unassailable grid, and there's a ton of robust filters some developers clearly worked very hard on – none of which matter, because for some madcap reason it auto-sets sorting to "by manufacturer".

You can send things to your bank directly, which is nice, but that requires right-clicking, marking as 'bank', and then holding down a button press, instead of just having a 'send to bank' button when you right-click. Oh, and also sometimes when you mark something as trash, the game panics and actually marks an item two or three rows above the thing you're clicking on.

But it doesn't stop there, no no. The widget for class mods is functionally useless – see, class mods give you free points in a handful of skills, but the UI only shows their icons. Inspect the class mod, and you only get their names. You need to equip the class mod, then go over to the skill tree, and then hunt to see which skills it affects. Why?

The crime of this is that inventory management in a game where you get heaps of loot absolutely has to be good – because you're going to be doing it a lot – and it's a complete trash heap here.

I spent my playthrough sorting most of my loot via the equipment screen rather than the backpack, since it let me compare my guns

easily, organised my loot by type, and auto-filtered my gear. And if that isn't an indictment of your inventory system I don't know what is. Luckily, the actual RPG underpinning said loot fatigue was enough to keep me hooked, and the deeper I went, the more enamoured I became.

ON THE HUNT

What gives *Borderlands 4* the real juice are its vault hunters, and these are some of the best we've seen out of the series yet when it comes to variety.

Each character has a core passive, three skill trees, a choice of three action skills, and two modifiers to said action skills. Except within those skill trees, you also have three branches at the end which all play differently.

I spent my playthrough as Rafa using the Peacebreaker Cannons – and in his Peacebreaker Cannons tree, Rafa has three branches: one about movement speed and keeping Overdrive up (my choice), one that buffs his cannons with elemental damage, and another that lets him stack all sorts of bonuses into his indirect damage, making said cannons the star of the show.

In the post-game, I got a legendary shotgun with three elemental damage types – and I

decided to swap over to that elemental tree, adding a passive modifier that turned my trusty rocket launchers into lasers and stripped me of my movement speed bonuses in exchange for raw status spread and face-melting DPS.

It felt different, and it suddenly dawned on me that this was simply a change in which branch of a single skill tree I was in. After 47 hours, I had experienced two out of nine ways I could've played my character.

Add in legendary equipment modifiers, the new Firmware system, and the post-campaign specialisations tree, and Gearbox has given players a vast playground to muck around in.

The only complaint I have is that it takes a minute to get there. As is the case with most *Borderlands* games, the opening hours are a smidge slow, since you only get one skill point per level – but when characters come online at around level 15, that all melts away.

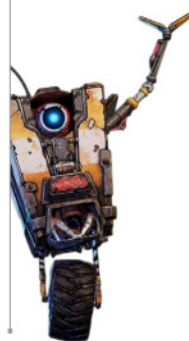
For all my gripes – and I do have quite a few of them – I still find myself itching to play more *BL4*. It speaks to the strength of the damn thing that one of the most terribly conceived UIs in recent memory somehow didn't ruin it for me. Even though you have to use said UI routinely.

I want to muck around with builds, I want to play co-op and, most importantly, I'm somehow not bored of shooting people and watching them explode into an utterly illegible cloud of numbers.

Borderlands 4 may well be the strongest game in the series – and while it flails in a sea of backwards choices, it doesn't quite drown. I've been loving my time with it, somehow, in spite of all of my problems with its clunky frame.

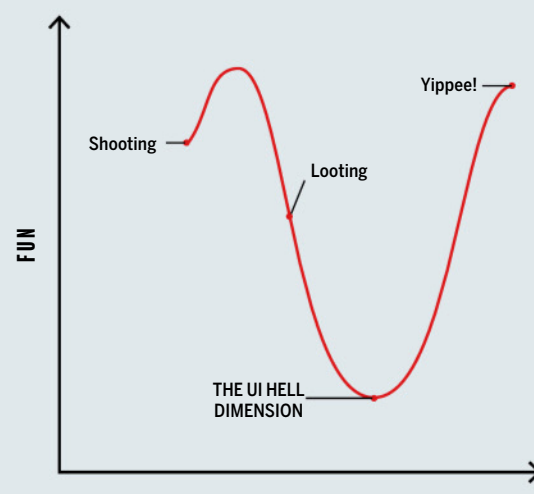
If you've ever had a serotonin spike from seeing a big number, if you've ever felt that blissful open world checklist haze, if you've ever enjoyed building in an ARPG, then I recommend you give *BL4* a go. If you can run it – or stomach some bad inventory management – there's looter-shooter bliss on the other side of that trash heap. ■

I got a legendary shotgun with three elemental damage types



THE BORDERLANDS 4 CYCLE

Mostly having fun. Mostly



PC GAMER VERDICT

Even a terrible UI and choppy performance didn't spoil several dozen hours of numbers-go-up bliss.

82



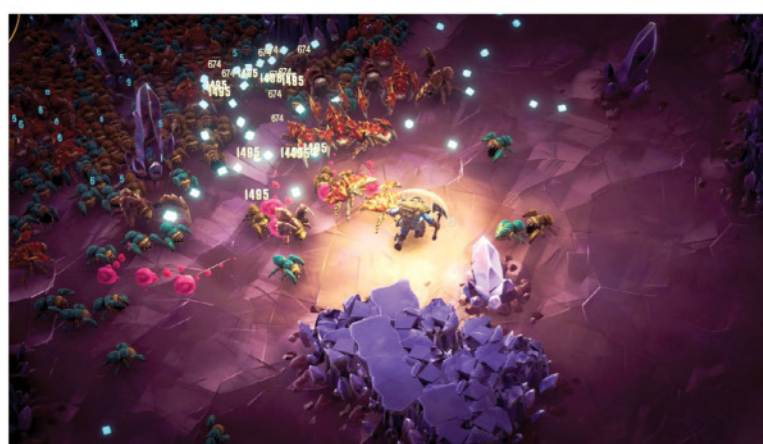
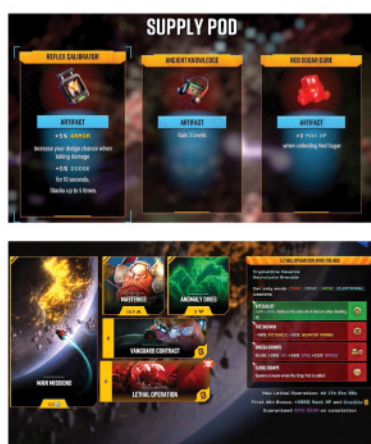
Bugs are easily tricked into walking on lava.



RIGHT: Five different categories of mission, each with multiple modes and difficulties. There's plenty to do.

FAR RIGHT: When bugs die, they drop XP blocks.

BELOW: Elimination missions always end in a boss fight with a dreadnought – a seriously nail-biting battle.



GOLD RUSH

DEEP ROCK GALACTIC: SURVIVOR has dug its way out of Early Access, and it rocks

By Robin Valentine

It was easy to think when *Deep Rock Galactic: Survivor* was first announced that it was a cynical project. A spin-off of a popular game from a different developer, jumping on a new genre bandwagon, and seemingly built with reused assets. But over the last few years I've played a lot of different *Vampire Survivors* imitators, and all the way through *Deep Rock Galactic: Survivor's* run in Early Access, it's been the king of the pack.

The core action of *DRG:S* is deceptively simple. Your dwarf miner is dropped onto an alien asteroid and tasked with mining for resources and surviving against escalating hordes of bugs. Your weapons fire automatically, and as you level up you're able to add new guns and fine-tune them with stat upgrades and modifiers.

DRG:S's special sauce is found in its environments. Each stage is its own randomly generated cavern, and your dwarf's pickaxe allows them to burrow through the rock walls, creating their own tunnels and arenas. This is where combat gets tactical, because most bugs don't have that ability. As the swarms chase you, you're able to shape the landscape against them, escaping down tunnels, creating bottlenecks, or leading them in circles.

Different biomes add further wrinkles – from lava floes to skirt around or lead bugs through, to mushrooms that allow you to leap right over swarms, to thorny vines

that regrow after you mine through them.

It all contributes to the game's wonderfully inventive feel. Whether you're luring an elite alien into being crushed by a falling supply pod, or dancing towards and away

from a horde to trick explosive bugs into blowing up prematurely, it always feels like there's ways to get one up on the enemy.

DRILL RIDE

The 1.0 release spices things up further with a whole new mission type – Escort Duty – which sees you accompanying a huge mobile drill across the map. It's a fantastic twist

It all contributes to the game's wonderfully inventive feel

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A *Vampire Survivors*-like in the world of *Deep Rock Galactic*

EXPECT TO PAY

£11

DEVELOPER

Funday Games

PUBLISHER

Ghost Ship Publishing

REVIEWED ON

AMD Ryzen 9 5900X, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3080

MULTIPLAYER

No

LINK

fundaygames.dk/deep-rock-galactic-survivor

on the formula. The narrower passages and the need to stick close to your charge creates tense, claustrophobic battles without the luxury of fleeing to a different area when things get tough. At the same time, following the drill as it ploughs through rock and enemies with equal ease is a lovely little power trip.

There are two mission tracks to work through, permanent upgrades to buy with mined resources, achievements that unlock new gear and modes, and more. It's a lot, but it ensures every play session offers its own dopamine rush of rewards, and there's always something new to try.

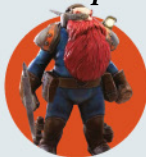
The release version has rounded that out with one last addition – loot. Gear now drops during missions, and can be equipped to grant permanent bonuses. It's a fun new thing to fiddle with, though managing the loadouts of 12 different dwarfs after every run can feel like busywork.

There's definitely a fine line, too, between enjoying the multitude of ways to push the numbers up, and feeling the weight of a long grind ahead of you. *DRG:S* doesn't really lock meaningful content behind any task too onerous, but for completionists ticking your way down every checklist it has to offer will certainly take over 100 hours.

To me, *DRG:S* is the genre at its most engaging and tactical. Instead of finally growing bored of its formula, I find myself just imagining yet more things developer Funday Games could add in new updates to come. This release makes the game feel complete and ready for a broader audience, after over a year of public development. But at the same time, it feels like it could be only the beginning. ■

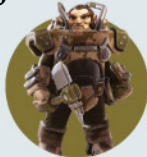
DWARVES AT WORK

DRG:S spins the four roles out into 12 classes



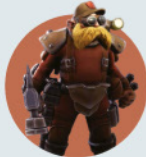
SCOUT

Classic scouts just have a basic speed and HP buff. Recons are good at dodging and use light weapons, while Sharp Shooters love big critical hits.



GUNNER

Specialists want to be firing as many bullets as possible, Juggernauts like close-range combat, and Heavy Gunners are the masters of heavy weapons.



ENGINEER

Maintenance Workers are all about turrets, Tinkerers focus on getting their weapons as high level as possible, and Demolitionists love explosions.



DRILLER

Foremen are the best diggers, Interrogators love elemental guns and damage-over-time, and Strong Armed drillers specialise in throwing weapons.

PC GAMER

VERDICT

Funday Games' *Deep Rock Galactic: Survivor* proves *Vampire Survivors* is no longer the king of the genre.

90

SURF'S UP

SWORD OF THE SEA is a short but spectacular sword-surfing adventure

By Sean Martin

Long story short: *Sword of the Sea's* surfing feels great. Whether it's blazing across rolling sand dunes with a pack of dolphins in tow, zooming down a snowy slope into a ski jump, or cresting the waves and leaving a foaming trail in your wake, I really feel like Giant Squid has achieved something special here. Though linear, each of the game's areas offer up big open spaces you can take time surfing around while also solving the puzzles needed to progress – not that any of the puzzles are particularly hard.

It's very much an atmospheric surfing game, emphasis on the atmosphere, as you enjoy the scenery and soundtrack (both of which are stellar), and the freestyle way you can use movement to explore each space. This is further complemented with additional tricks you can purchase from vendors you'll find, while you'll also gain additional movement abilities through the story.

Though tricks aren't really a big part of the game, one nice touch is that you can find little challenge-based skate parks in each area, where you'll hit an hourglass and have to score as many points as you can during the time limit. Besides that, you mainly just pop tricks at your own speed when travelling around. It's worth pointing out that the trick system isn't particularly deep – you're not going to be mashing buttons and pulling off gnarly combos here, partly because that's not really what the game is about.

Sword of the Sea isn't going to blow you away in terms of puzzling, narrative, or board-based tricks, but if you're looking for a surfing experience that's both chill and beautiful, you're in good company. *Sword of the Sea* has a similar vibe to *Alto's Odyssey*, and it feels like there are a few knowing nods to that game, in both some of the desert architecture and the sidescrolling camera in some sequences.

In *Sword of the Sea*, you play as a mysterious warrior roused from their

sleep by a single drop of water running down their sword. You then ride this sword (of the sea) into an ancient slumbering kingdom and use it to start the river of life flowing again. It's very much one of those classic 'awakening a sleeping kingdom' narratives, and while it's nothing to write home about, it makes for some really impressive spectacles.

There are some fantastic and joyful sequences as you travel

LIFE-FILLED AQUASCAPE

The first area, for example, is a desert, but when you start to return the water, you realise that there's an ocean under the sand. Revitalising each area turns it into a verdant life-filled aquascape with different sea creatures, but mechanically, it

FEEL THE FLOW

How to get the best surfing experience



Having played both with and without, one thing I will say about *Sword of the Sea's* surfing is that using a DualSense controller with haptics makes ALL the difference. Everything feels 100% more grounded, as you get a sense of the different textures and terrains you're gliding over. So plug a DualSense in if you can.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An atmospheric surfing game from the creators of *The Pathless*

EXPECT TO PAY
£25

DEVELOPER
Giant Squid

PUBLISHER
Giant Squid

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i5 12400F,
32GB RAM, AMD
Radeon RX 6800 XT

MULTIPLAYER?
No

LINK
steam.pm/
app/2453160

also adds new ways to traverse the area and opens the path forward. Bringing the ocean back also adds more currency to collect, giving you an opportunity to re-explore each area and make use of the new routes of traversal – a great little touch that turns each area into a kind of skatepark for your swordboard.

SAND, SEA, SNOW

There are some fantastic and joyful sequences as you travel through sand, sea and snow, reawakening the kingdom and progressing through each area – though I won't spoil any of them here. You might find yourself a little bored by its simple and somewhat repetitive puzzles at times – most of them involve finding and activating three things – but *Sword of the Sea's* real strength lies in taking you from spectacle to spectacle, and for me at least, that was enough to sustain the experience and make it enjoyable, even when I found other elements a little lacklustre.

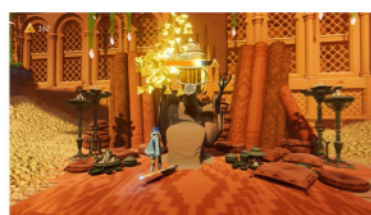
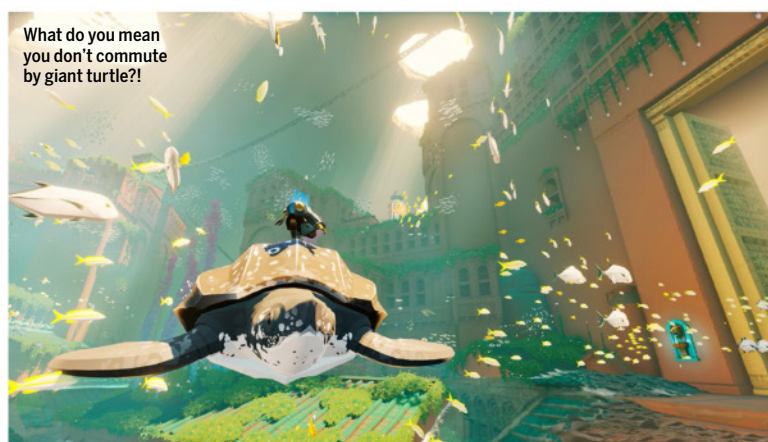
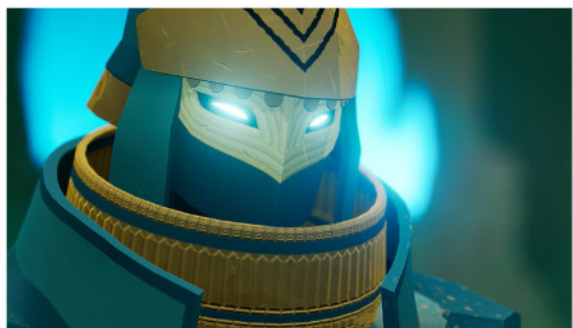
It's important to note that *Sword of the Sea* is also quite short. I completed the main game in just under four hours, and I wasn't by any means rushing, since I searched for collectibles in all but the final area, and purchased all but one of the tricks. Finishing the game unlocks new game plus, granting you a speedometer and a trick display for subsequent runs, if you're the kind of person who'll want to master surfing or try to speedrun.

I did walk away satisfied with the experience. While I don't think I'll go back to it, *Sword of the Sea* is an extremely pleasant way to spend an afternoon and it's somewhat refreshing to play a short game that doesn't overstay its welcome. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Sword of the Sea's atmosphere and movement propel it where its simple and repetitive puzzles can't.

78



ABOVE: Doom knight suddenly realised the latest PC Gamer magazine is out.



BELOW: Vistas often drip with character.





The environments get progressively weirder the further down you go.

DOWN AND OUT

Explore a hole new world in **FALLSTRUKTURAL**

We've had the climbing game bubble, with games like *Beton Brutal*, *Lorn's Lure* and *Peaks of Yore*, and now it's time for the inverse: games about falling, with style. Getting in on the ground floor – or is it the top floor? – of this new sub-sub-genre is the deviously slippery *Fallstruktural*, in which you have to hop down a hole filled in with bits and pieces of ruined, mysterious structures.

And falling is right, given how many times I slipped to my doom. The atmosphere is pure *Dark Souls*, specifically *Dark Souls 2*, which had a few memorable moments of tactically plunging down a big well, or a staircase of coffins.

In fact, that coffin staircase is here as well, in what I presume is a nod to From's sequel. So we have *Dark Souls* and climbing (sorta) on the bingo card of Tom's favourite things, making *Fallstruktural* a shoo-in for my game of the year. Right?

The thing about first-person falling is that it's not all that difficult, usually. You're given a good view of the chasm before you, and movement physics that are generally fast and immediately responsive.

Everyone's happy with the boomer shooter physics, so there's really no need to mess with the formula. But in a game about descent, a game that wants to be the *Dark Souls* of climbing down, that sense of snappiness might make it a bit too easy.

The thing about first-person falling is that it's not all that difficult

BORN SLIPPY

So instead of snappiness, we have slippiness. Yes this is a climbing game set in a slippery ice world, although the only

clues that you've wandered into one are the teeny snowflakes floating through the air. The mysteriously misty environment resembles *Dark Souls*' Lordran, complete with a huge tree and various ancient structures, which have been exploded vertically and suspended

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A difficult game about climbing down a big hole. Can you survive it?

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Fynn Levy, Rollin' Barrel, Stuffed Wombat

PUBLISHER
Stuffed Wombat

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/fallstruktural

in the air to present the player with a steep platforming challenge.

The movement speed is fast, and so is the running momentum, so you can attempt large jumps. However, in a world comprised of little bits of platforms, twisty tree trunks and slender roofs, it's very easy to overshoot a jump, or to undershoot. You're trying to get to the bottom, of course, though there's an asterisk and the small print says 'in one piece'. Fall just a few feet and it fades to black and restarts the game, resisting the visceral horror of the smashed-melon-head in a way I am thankful for. But while I'm sure I could have survived that fall, I can't deny the tempting tendrils of this well-designed, multi-pathed environment. There are hidden routes, for the keen observer to discover, if you can get to grips with the movement. I'm sure you will, but you might not thank me for it. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

There's a huge feeling of satisfaction when you finally make progress, but I'm not fully onboard with it.

70

BELOW: It's a very forgiving game, but it's mainly about the story.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Nozomu Games

LINK
bit.ly/LoveLettersGame

TEXT SPEAK

Love letters? Then you'll love **LOVE LETTERS**

Few games combine mechanics and theme as well as *Love Letters*, where you help a lovelorn adolescent express himself in front of his classmate. He's too nervous to even say a word, so it falls to yours truly to help him speak, by constructing words from a jumbled pile.

Each level presents you with a sentence to make, and you have to assemble the words from the box of letters on the right. Circle a letter, or a bunch of them at once, and they will automatically fill in the Hangman-like sentence. However, you have a limited number of circles to play with, and the sizes of the circles is limited as well, meaning you have to envelop as many letters as possible, each time you draw.

Picking out letters to assemble words fits the adolescent theme

perfectly, and the way the mechanics change to mirror their changing relationship is expertly done.

In a game with story and puzzles in it, one is usually in support of the other, and here the puzzles support the narrative and the protagonist as he grows in confidence. In an alternate universe, these puzzles have been more fully explored, and I am left with a yearning for that, given how original the concept is here.

If the limitations were even more limiting, by further restricting the number of circles you could make, or by disallowing circles that also have the wrong letters in them, *Love Letters* could have been a great puzzler. I think the story would have supported more depth. Still, I had a great time playing through this very sweet love story, which is still a pretty good puzzle game. ■

79

YOU SHALL, GUY

Escape from the stress of the real world with **SHALGUY**

Given that every platformer is a *Metroidvania* now, and every *Metroidvania* is a *Soulslike*, discovering *Shalguy* was like stepping back in time to the days of early indie classics. The joy of discovery is the order of the day in this scribbly platform game.

Although I suppose it's more of an adventure game than a platformer, given that there are no real platforming challenges, no combat to bog things down, and plenty of collectible items to find new uses for. However, it's all in service of exploring a peaceful, minimalist world populated by interesting creatures and with pixel art that manages to be childlike yet packed with background detail.

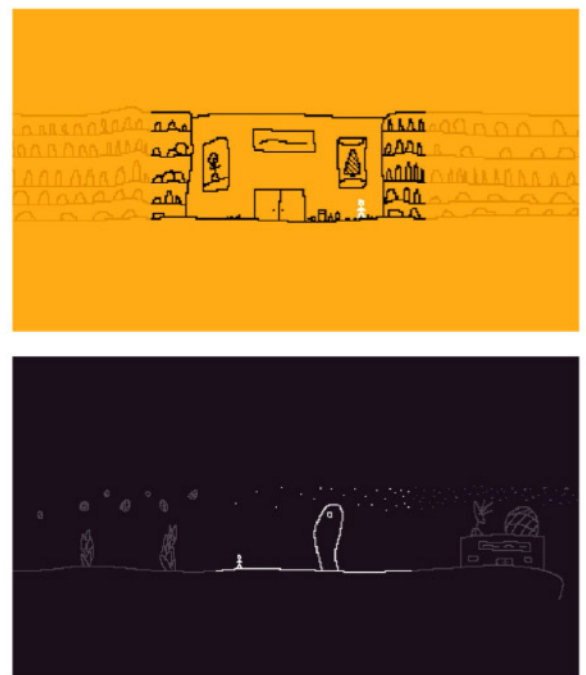
You might find a sailable boat, a large hotel with new sights waiting on every floor, or [third thing

redacted to preserve surprise], and every time you think you've seen the peak – you haven't.

In a game with no detectable walking animation, it's remarkable how tangible this world feels. The ambient sound effects fill in a lot of the gaps, as do the subtle colour transitions. And these are intricate, interconnected spaces, full of hidden areas and mysterious codes.

There's no map, but I was just about able to find my way around, thanks to that neat colour theming. This game had its hooks in me. I was sat at my desk transported to its beguiling world, re-attaching my jaw every time it whipped out a fresh surprise. It doesn't have a save system, so that's another reason to pop the kettle on and make the time for *Shalguy*, but I hardly think you'll regret your decision. ■

BELOW: The pixel art is expressive and full of detail.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
soulofkazak

LINK
bit.ly/Shalguy

82

THEY'RE BACK

OLD GAMES REVISITED by Matthew Elliott



This might look like violence, but Tak's actually trying to extinguish a fire.

TAK THE BLOCK

Laying down the law in **JUDGEMENT**

One of the great things about videogames, and, more specifically, the work of Ryu Ga Gotoku Studios, is the ease with which they make us believe the impossible. But even in a franchise that lets you fight bears, the single most outrageous lie *Yakuza* has made me believe is that it's possible for a 40-year-old man to look cool wearing a wallet chain.

But look cool he does. It's one of the many ways *Judgement* protagonist Takayuki Yagami fits the classic archetype of a *Yakuza* protagonist. As an ex-lawyer turned private detective, he's usually on the correct side of the law, but this, somewhat surprisingly, is pretty standard for the series. It's hard to think of any *Yakuza* protagonists committing crimes other than brutalising other, worse criminals. If anything, Tak feels more morally grey than someone like Kiryu, for instance, who wouldn't accept payment for exposing cheating husbands or catching panty thieves.

The fact that Yagami and his anvil-headed associate Kaito both have ties to the yakuza makes *Judgement* more interesting. Most series fans want an excuse to go back

to Kamurocho, if indeed they ever leave. It's the gaming equivalent of the comforting, body-shaped divot in a memory foam mattress. Seeing a twist on that perspective, however slight, is strangely powerful. I find myself looking up at buildings when

I play *Yakuza* games, trying to recall how it's changed and which missions happened in which places.

Yagami's detective work helps you see a different side of Kamurocho

GAME OF DRONES

Yagami's detective work also helps you see a different side of

Kamurocho, even if not all of it is successful. Nobody has ever made a minigame about tailing suspects entertaining, and that doesn't change here. There are too many instant fail states, and staying a specific distance away from people just feels like Restraining Order: The Game. Using

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The hyperviolent anime reboot of *Magnum PI*. With wallet chains

EXPECT TO PAY
£35

DEVELOPER
Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio

PUBLISHER
Sega

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce GTX 1070

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/2058180/Judgment/

the drone to gather evidence is more fun, but generally, *Judgement* never quite lives up to the promise of being a detective game. It's more like a traditional *Yakuza* entry in that most missions end with a fight; you just spend more time here finding justification for it.

If the detective stuff doesn't quite land, the story more than makes up for it. It's one of the most wonderfully convoluted tales RGG Studios has ever told: at once absurd, engaging, surprising and sophisticated. Japan's rigid legal system is at the heart of it: it's a country with an absurdly-high conviction rate, and Yagami, as a former lawyer, is one of the few people who's managed to get a suspect acquitted. The scale is huge, too: a tale of death, dementia and a conspiracy that will have you fly-kicking all the way up to the upper echelons of government. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Essentially a classic *Yakuza* game dressed up as a plain-clothes policeman. If that makes any sense at all.

80

BELOW: Why does 'bone orchard' sound like prison slang for something?



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£25

DEVELOPER
Capcom

PUBLISHER
Capcom

COURT STEALING

No objections to **PHOENIX WRIGHT: ACE ATTORNEY TRILOGY**

As someone who's spent over five years studying law, I should be in a position to assure you that no, real-life court cases are nothing like the *Ace Attorney* series. But have never actually practiced law, part of me chooses to believe that the *Phoenix Wright* experience is based on fact.

I want a world where every case is presided over by a judge with a delicious bushy beard. Where shouting and slamming tables can be a part of the most mundane legal disagreement. Where prosecutors attend court wielding whips and bubbling homoerotic tension underpins every single case. That's the promise of pretty much all 14 episodes within the first *Ace Attorney* collection. There's enough variation within the three games here to keep it interesting, even if

they all suffer from their own issues. The pacing in the first game is off, for example, and *Justice for All* has a few dud cases.

They all, however, suffer from the central frustration with the series. It's not just a case of what you present, but when. Sometimes it feels like you know exactly what the answer is, but you get penalised for structuring it in the wrong way. Perhaps this is the most authentic way to do it: we are, after all, exploring a profession where filing evidence incorrectly can lead to acquittals. These niggles aren't really what the game is about. It's huge, sweeping, dramatic, absurd. Plus there's something intoxicating about building a case, cross-examining witnesses, and securing the verdict you want, even if it's nothing like the real thing. Or maybe it is... ■

82

OSCAR WORTHY

Missing hands and handsome doors in **SYBERIA**

Finally in our collection of lawyer-adjacent games is *Syberia*: a title that manages to elegantly bridge the gap between automatons (not robots, please) being charming and nightmarishly sinister. I struggle to think of a game where I've been so captivated and repulsed at the same time.

As suspiciously attractive American lawyer Kate Archer, your job is to oversee the corporate takeover of a toy factory. It's the sort of setup that is surprising precisely because it's so boring, even if you already know how it ends. No hero, in any form of media ever, has followed their dream of an aggressive buyout of a toy manufacturer. If it wasn't already enough like a Hallmark Christmas movie, Kate's fiancé is cheating on her and there's snow everywhere. It's a nice surprise, then, that *Syberia* is

surprising in lots of other ways. The setting, full of ornate Art Nouveau architecture and whirring machinery, is pure magic. And the old school presentation doesn't dumb things down. There's plenty to read and the puzzles walk the classic point-and-click line of being occasionally logical, often obtuse. Some of them slightly outstay their welcome, but the world is rich enough that you'll want to stick around. The problem with most adventure games is that they're rarely mechanically interesting enough to warrant your time: it's a genre laid low by the let's play. *Syberia*, while not flawless, has a world interesting enough to be worth exploring yourself. Close the curtains, make some cocoa, turn off the heating, and try not to think too deeply about whether it's possible for an automaton to have a soul. ■

70

BELOW: How did we go from hotels like this to AirBnBs?



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£10

DEVELOPER
Microids

PUBLISHER
Microids



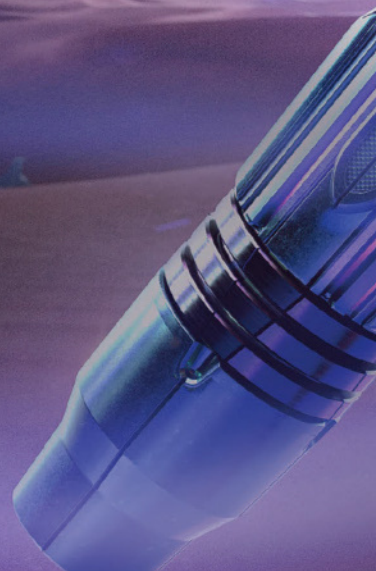
A WORLD UNKNOWN.
A MIND UNLEASHED.

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MISSION STARTS:
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Nintendo Switch 2 console sold separately





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- Supports Joy-Con™ 2 mouse controls
- Support for up to 4K resolution when playing in TV mode*
- Support for frame rates of up to 120 fps**
- HDR support***

* Requires a TV that supports the specified resolution. ** Display compatible with 120Hz refresh rate required for 120 fps in TV mode. 120 fps only available at 1080p resolution. Frame rate is fixed to a maximum of 60 fps for 4K output. *** HDR-compatible display required when playing in TV mode.

GO.
COMPARE

**SET OFF
SATISFIED.**



From city breaks to sandy toes,
scan here for cover that goes the distance.



HARDWARE

GET THE PC YOUR GAMES DESERVE

92

GROUP TEST

Six of the best new gaming laptops rated for speed and power.

98

TECH REPORT

Why running games on rigs below minimum specs is thriving.

102

TECH BUILD

A stunning gaming PC built for max airflow with an RTX 5070 Ti GPU.

104

BUYER'S GUIDE

Craft the best gaming rig for your budget with our ideal components list.



GROUP TEST

GAMING LAPTOPS

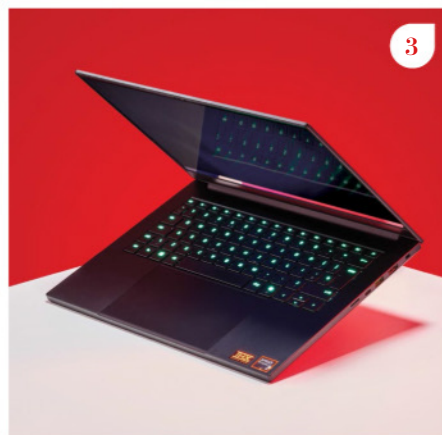
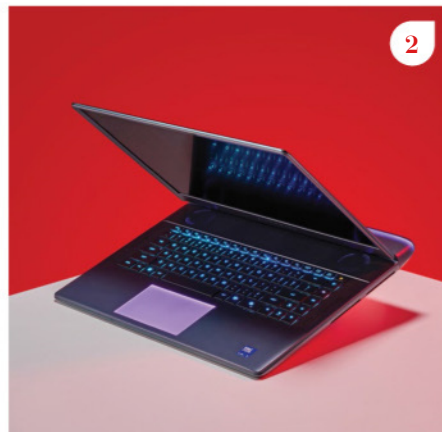
Powerful, portable machines – gaming laptops are better than ever today

By Jacob Ridley



A photograph of three gaming laptops arranged on a white, stepped surface against a vibrant red background. The laptop in the foreground is an ASUS ROG Zephyrus G14, shown from a low angle with its screen tilted back. Behind it, another laptop is partially visible. To the right, a third laptop is shown from a side-on perspective, displaying its keyboard and trackpad. The laptops have dark, possibly black or dark blue, finishes with some visible RGB lighting on the keyboards.

Once upon a time, not that long ago, you'd be laughed out of a meeting or seminar for opening up a gaming laptop. I've had it happen to me, during my early days writing about hardware. I took a gaming laptop to an event filled with tech journos and was roundly made fun of when I had to desperately find a power outlet in a meeting room, of which there were none, to try and save my ailing battery and any semblance of my dignity. As gaming laptops have evolved, that's no longer something to worry about, though.



TUF A14 (2025)

ASUS **£1,600**

Bit of everything

1 The Asus TUF A14 has been reformed for 2025. It's largely the same laptop we've come to appreciate over the past year – not much has changed with the latest model. But it needn't have. Asus got a lot right with the TUF design, and this year's model adds an RTX 5060 and AMD Ryzen AI chip to help sweeten the deal. Slim and understated – two words not often used in correlation with 'gaming laptop'. Yet here is such a device and it wears it well. The screen will run up to 1600p and 165Hz, which is only really in range of the RTX 5060 at its core with help from

Nvidia's Frame Generation feature, or at the very least DLSS. Though it looks sharp, crisp and bright for an IPS panel.

The standout feature for the A14 has to be the battery life. We saw well over two hours in the PCMark 10 gaming test, which is really spectacular considering the 73Wh battery in the TUF A14. It manages plenty of time away from the outlet nonetheless, which really makes this laptop a top pick for gaming and work.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Sleek
- All the essentials
- Great battery life

SPECS CPU: AMD RYZEN AI 7 350 / GPU: NVIDIA RTX 5060 (110 W) / RAM: 16GB LPDDR5X-7500 / SSD: 1TB PCIe 4.0 / DISPLAY: 14-INCH IPS / WEIGHT: 1.46KG

16 Area-51

ALIENWARE **£2,949**

Somewhat otherworldly

2 The latest Area-51 laptop lineup from Alienware is surprisingly in keeping with Alienware machines of yore. It's distinctly weird, but not in a cheap way. The screen juts out on a hinge, the underside has a glass window through which you can see... not very much. It's curvy and a little otherworldly in a way that I'm totally into. Smaller than the 18-inch monster we've also tested for this group test, the Alienware 16 is still nowhere near as svelte as TUF or Blade models from competitors. Though for its size, it packs a punch. The RTX 5080 inside this machine runs

well with minimal fan whirr, and what noise it generates is consistent enough to not be distracting. There are a few things we'd like to see on this model to really make it one of the best. Personally, an OLED screen wouldn't go amiss, as Alienware has only adopted an IPS for this model. Though it is a vibrant panel and rated to 240Hz across a 1600p resolution. A good pairing with the RTX 5080 and Core Ultra 9 chip under the hood.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Weird, in a good way
- Looks good
- Bulky

SPECS CPU: INTEL CORE ULTRA 9 275HX / GPU: RTX 5080 (175 W) / RAM: 32GB DDR5-6400 / SSD: 2TB PCIe 4.0 NVME / DISPLAY: 16-INCH IPS / WEIGHT: 3.4KG

**OFFERS A BRIGHT AND VIBRANT
OLED PANEL WITH AN ATTAINABLE
240HZ REFRESH RATE**



GROUP TEST

Blade 14

RAZER **£2,400**

A lovely thing

3 This year's Razer Blade 14 is a big step-up from last year's. Whereas last year's model was as thick as Garfield, this year's model has been slimmed down. It's more befitting of the blade name, that's for sure. Razer has ditched removable memory to pave the way for the slimmer chassis, but it's importantly kept performance where it matters. That's important as it comes with a 2880 x 1800 resolution OLED screen, which looks great but requires some graphical grunt to get it operating at acceptable speeds. The 8GB RTX 5070 model of the Blade 14 that we

reviewed sometimes falls short of that but is helped along massively by Frame Generation and DLSS. You have to spend big on a Blade 14, but the laptop feels worth it. It's no less the all-metal beauty we've come to expect from Razer's laptop line-up, albeit in a more practical size for gaming. Price is a big factor to consider here, however, as the similarly excellent Asus ROG Zephyrus G14 with an RTX 5070 Ti is available for similar money.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Top quality
- Looks superb
- Eye-watering price

SPECS CPU: AMD RYZEN AI 9 365 / GPU: NVIDIA RTX 5070 (115 W) / RAM: 32GB LPDDR5X-8000 / SSD: 1TB PCIE 4.0 SSD / DISPLAY: 14-INCH OLED / WEIGHT: 1.63KG

Legion Pro 7i

LENOVO **£3,200**

To the max

4 If you want to get the most from your gaming laptop, the Legion Pro 7i is the best way to go about it. It holds nothing back. Lenovo has managed to push the RTX 5080 mobile found inside our review unit to such an extent that it actually beats out the RTX 5090 mobile in the Razer Blade 16. All the while keeping temperatures lower. Beyond raw performance, the Legion Pro 7i offers a bright and vibrant OLED panel with an attainable 240Hz refresh rate. Inside, it has two NVMe slots and removable memory for easy upgrades, alongside a 99.9 Wh battery. That upgradeability

comes at the expense of a svelte form factor like some others in this group test, and that might put off some prospective buyers, as will the lack of lifespan away from an outlet. But for all-out gamers, it's the clear pick.

The downside is the price. We're used to the so-called Razer tax for its Blade machines, but less so Lenovo's even larger premium for this. Still, it makes light work of games, and that will surely count for a lot.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Top spec
- Unbeatable performance
- Expensive

SPECS CPU: INTEL CORE ULTRA 9 275HX / GPU: NVIDIA RTX 5080 (175 W) / RAM: 32GB DDR5-6400 / SSD: 2X 1TB PCIE 4.0 SSD / DISPLAY: 16-INCH OLED / WEIGHT: 2.72KG



**YOU CAN POP THE BACK
OFF AND UPGRADE THE
KEY COMPONENTS**



BENCHMARKS

Cyberpunk 2077, RT Ultra preset, 1080p

Average FPS 1% low

Asus TUF A14 (2025), RTX 5060



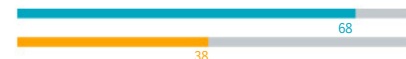
Alienware 16 Area-51, RTX 5080



Razer Blade 14 (2025), RTX 5070



Lenovo Legion 7i Pro Gen10, RTX 5080



Asus ROG Strix G16, RTX 5070



Alienware 18 Area-51, RTX 5090



ROG Strix G16

ASUS £2,300

Time for an upgrade

5 If you're looking for a portable laptop you can take on the move, you'll be wanting to check out the Zephyrus G16, G14, or Blade 14 instead. The ROG Strix G16... it's chunky. The Strix has a party trick, made possible by its large chassis. You can pop the back off and upgrade some of the key components – memory, storage – without requiring any tools whatsoever. Push the sliding clip on the rear of the machine and off pops the entire underside of the laptop, exposing the neatest innards we've seen in some time. Most of the important bits are protected by further covers,

though the twin SSD slots and memory are easily removed without any screws. Beyond that, the Strix G16 is fairly run-of-the-mill. The screen is an IPS, rather than OLED, but it is rated to 240Hz. That's tough going for the RTX 5070 model we reviewed without Frame Generation and DLSS coming to the rescue. I'd prefer the Zephyrus over this, but it depends on how you plan to use it. I wouldn't want to try to use the Strix on an aeroplane.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Tool-free upgrades
- Big
- Good screen

SPECS CPU: INTEL CORE ULTRA 9 275HX / GPU: NVIDIA RTX 5070 (115 W) / RAM: 32GB DDR5-5600 / SSD: 1TB PCIE 4.0 / DISPLAY: 16-INCH IPS / WEIGHT: 2.65KG

18 Area-51

ALIENWARE £4,349

Out of this world

6 The Alienware 18 Area-51 looks and feels like an Alienware of old. It's high-end, almost classy, and yet keeps that otherworldly extravagance that older PC gamers will recognise anywhere. It's been a while since Alienware has put out a laptop we're really fond of, but the Area-51 is it.

With an RTX 5090, 64GB of RAM, and 2TB of storage, the Area-51 we got our humanoid hands on isn't sparing any expense. Unsurprisingly, then, the price tag is out of this world, too. Though it's only asking as much as most other similarly specced laptops, and there's a

strong argument for siding with this extraterrestrial option for its top-notch performance.

It's not a perfect run for the Area-51. The keyboard is clicky, which is plenty responsive, but it feels cheap by comparison to others. The screen, capable of hitting a glaring 500 nits, doesn't support HDR. And there's a weird issue wherein the laptop's frame rate in games is capped to 30fps while on battery power, no matter what you tweak in the settings.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Top cooling
- High performance
- Weird FPS cap

SPECS CPU: INTEL CORE ULTRA 9 275HX / GPU: RTX 5090 (175 W) / RAM: 64GB DDR5-6400 / SSD: 2TB PCIE 5.0 NVME / DISPLAY: 18-INCH IPS / WEIGHT: 4.34KG



Cyberpunk 2077 as you've never seen it – looking like an early-noughties MMO.

DE-MASTERED

The art of running games on rigs below their minimum specs is thriving

It isn't just graphics cards that cost a lot more today than they did recently. It's the same story for basically every other consumer purchase, from the games we run to make those GPUs sweat, to the teabags that sustain us during that vital scientific testing, and the electricity used to boil the kettle – as has been well documented, it's all gone through the roof.

But this is PC gaming. A subculture whose very origins are founded in the art of bending hardware to our will, making it do things it wasn't designed for. The first home computers weren't for gaming, they were for doing boring things, like looking at numbers. If they were meant for fun, they wouldn't have manufactured them all in hearing-aid beige.

Playing games on PCs was a subversion of their purpose, and many decades later you can almost hear the echo of that original sin as we subvert our hardware once again – this time to run games on components below the minimum requirements. That's not a comprehensive answer to the current and ongoing cost of living crisis, but in the absence of any sensible price adjustments from component manufacturers (or any particularly bright fiscal stimulation strategies from national governments), running the *Battlefield 6* beta on an old laptop is the best answer we have at this time.

A LOW BAR

Head over to Reddit and go on /r/lowendgaming and you'll be struck by a few things. Firstly, that a community of people has been helping each other to run games on inexpensive and outdated PC hardware for many years, long before all the insidious price hikes we're enduring today. And secondly, members of that community have been doing so with no small amount of ingenuity.

A typical exchange in that subreddit goes like this: a user states their hardware and asks for recommendations they should play, or whether a particular title will run on their machine. In the replies, people assure them that they managed to get *The Witcher 3* on medium settings running on a relatively basic array of elastic bands and wooden pulleys. The prevailing sentiment is that minimum requirements are over-cautious, that modern games running at their lowest graphics settings still look more than decent enough to constitute playable, and that maybe there's no such thing as a PC that's too old or underpowered. Intrigued, I decided to test out the theory.

Somehow – perhaps I'd been Derren Brown-ed by the aforementioned subreddit with the power of subliminal suggestion – I picked *The Witcher 3* as my test subject, and immediately found a small subculture of modders whose favourite pastime is creating the lowest graphics settings possible for it. Lowering all the in-game options to their



Tiny spec

De-making games isn't all about unlocking performance on older systems. There's also an element of art for art's sake, the pure joy of seeing a new title imagined using the rendering techniques – and often game mechanics – of yesteryear. That's at the heart of the de-make movement, which has spawned many titles on itch.io and troubled many an IP lawyer. Right now it's PS1 era, low-poly visuals that are in vogue. Give it ten years, and indie creators will be purposefully recreating the look of *Far Cry 3* for ironic effect.



FAR LEFT: Might be worth dropping the graphics preset down to medium on this beauty.

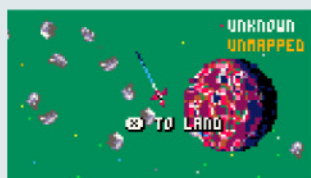
LEFT: An alternative solution: throw money at your system until requirements are irrelevant.

NEWLY OLD *Four de-make projects that take visuals back to basics*



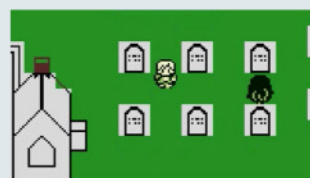
DEAD SPACE DMAKE

What's scarier than a spaceship full of monsters? Surviving it in 2001-o-vision.



LOW MEM SKY

A lot like Hello Games' mind-meltingly vast space sim, but 16bit. Runs in a browser.



SILENT HILL 2 20TH ANNIVERSARY DMAKE

A masterpiece about guilt and grief, only it's a Game Boy RPG now.



SUPER 3D PORTALS 6

Valve's physics-defying masterpiece, expressed as an Atari 2600 puzzler. That's pretty neat!

minimum values was only the beginning of the journey, I learned. How did the game look at this mid-point of its de-make? It looked... very playable. This is a decade-old title we're talking about and even maxed-out Geralt is showing a few crows' feet these days, so at the lowest settings the assets have nowhere to hide. Lighting looks perfunctory. Textures look a bit PS3.

But the overall sense of the world's there. There's life in Velen, in the NPCs' routines, the drama of its geography, even without especially complex lighting or sharply drawn assets. But things were about to get way more basic before I was through with CD Projekt's labour of love.

The *Ultimate Graphics Options Mod* by marveldom allows for much more tweaking than the game's front-end presents. It's basically a nicely packaged editable .ini file, and in here you can control everything from grass draw distance to NPC count, how long decals appear for, and how many of them appear at once. And when you turn everything down that can be turned down, *The Witcher 3* looks so basic, it almost starts to become beautiful again.

UNDERCLOCKING

On a surface level it's fun to see how far you can push a game's visually, in the opposite direction than we're used to as PC gamers. The end result looks very different, but the intrinsic enjoyment's the same: taking control of your software environment, and making your game look and run the way you want it to. But it's also tremendously useful to have a graphics mod like this if you're playing on old

machinery, of the kind that barely passed *The Witcher 3*'s minimum specs back in 2015.

VARIETY OF PARAMETERS

I dug deeper. Was there a similar mod for *Cyberpunk*? There was. It was, and indeed is, called *More Graphics Options – Performance Boost for Potato PC*, and I can't think of a better way to sum that up. Another editable .ini packaged up into a friendly front-end which allows a far greater variety of parameters to be tweaked than *Cyberpunk*'s already formidable graphics options menu does. The result is a less shiny Night City, but one that would run well on hardware which would otherwise struggle to yield playable frame rates. YouTuber Blunty managed to use the mod to get *Cyberpunk* working on a Ryzen 5 3400G, using its integrated AMD Vega 11 GPU, for example. To see the

famously demanding title running on such inexpensive and veteran hardware is a big win.

Until the world of hardware componentry stops being so frankly silly as it is currently, de-making games is a genuine solution. Track down mods that offer more graphics options than your chosen game's front-end, and make friends with the .ini files in your install directory. Bringing down the visual options below their intended minimum really does let you run titles on systems below minimum specs. If your current rig dies and you're left with an older backup machine or the prospect of buying replacement parts for inflated prices, the de-make route could save you hundreds. ■

Phil Iwanik

THE SENTIMENT IS THAT MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS ARE OVER-CAUTIOUS

WAR PHOTOGRAPHER

Capturing a game's visual beauty by sticking to spectator mode

A lot of games hardware marketing focuses on performance. Esports-ready mice and keyboards. High-refresh-rate monitors that promise you'll see the enemy faster and aim more accurately. Even in graphics hardware, extra frames and faster performance are generally the basis of any purchase argument. But I think that messaging misses a crucial aspect of what it is to have a powerful PC: sitting back and taking the time to enjoy the visuals. Letting the game happen, instead of imposing your will on it.

With *Battlefield 6* looming large at the moment, casting its complex, soft-edged, anti-aliased shadow over all of PC gaming, it's especially handy to keep that philosophy in mind. There's more than one way to enjoy a *Battlefield* game's visuals, and I'd argue the best way of all is to put the guns down entirely and embrace spectator mode.

I first tried it when *Battlefield V* arrived. It was one of the first wave of games to take advantage of Nvidia's new ray-tracing tech, marketed at the time as CG movie-like lighting which would previously take Hollywood studios days to render but magically now ran in real-time. And as it happened I'd just obtained an RTX 2080 Ti, the flagship card of Team Green's new ray tracing-focused GPU gen.

Ray tracing was subtle back then in 2019. Developers hadn't started spamming rainy alleyways filled with neon signs yet, so it wasn't always obvious where and when ray tracing was happening. That RTX 2-series gen wasn't as adept at calculating the zillion directions in which light might bounce as today's 5-series, either, so developers were more restrained about how they implemented it.

It was hard to find a spare minute during the desperate fight to stay alive in Iwo Jima, Wake Island or Halvøy to appreciate the way a fighter plane reflected across a car bonnet, or to observe a grenade explosion in a muddy puddle.

EYE IN THE SKY

So instead I entered *Battlefield V*'s spectator mode. It's generally not a doorway I darken in any game that offers it, but the stars had aligned on this occasion – I had a new GPU and I wanted to see exactly what it could do, and a game that was blessed with an unnaturally rigorous suite of camera options in spectator mode sounded perfect.

I can confidently say I spent more total hours in that mode than actually playing *Battlefield V*. At the start it was just about identifying the bits in each map where ray tracing was most visible – a marble floor in a ruined bank in the Devastation map was a particularly good spot – but afterwards, I started to look at the whole experience differently.

The satisfaction to be found in this sweaty online shooter, as far as I was concerned, was in capturing a really artful tracking shot. Finding a nice juicy battle, setting myself up at just the right

angle with the freecam, and using deft controller inputs to induce smooth, cinematic camerawork.

Six years later I feel the same way about *Battlefield 6*. More than a chance to prove my twitch aim or tactical nous, it's an opportunity to see what today's graphical architecture can muster in a virtual videographer's sandbox. The battles won't ruin my weekend or have me throwing peripherals across the room in a gamer rage, because I won't be in them. I'll be hovering above you like a voyeur, fiddling with camera sliders and time-of-day settings, with a low heart rate and a sense of graphics-induced serenity.

PIXEL PAPARAZZI

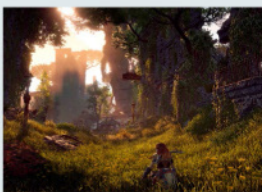
I know it isn't just me who plays games this way, because in the last few years developers have been pouring ever-more love and attention into their photo modes. It's far from a new trend, and those with long memories and long-dormant tumblr accounts will remember the days when *Skyrim* photography was all the rage. Creators would scout for

I HAD A NEW GPU AND I WANTED TO SEE EXACTLY WHAT IT COULD DO



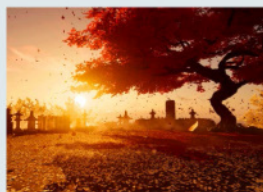
PHIL IWANIK
In between writing for PCG, self-proclaimed 'virtual war photographer' Phil spends his time documenting online battles. His work on the 2fort massacre in *Team Fortress 2* is especially harrowing.

SAY CHEESE AND DIE *Four of the best photo modes in PC gaming*



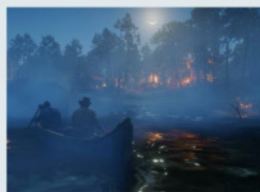
HORIZON: ZERO DAWN

Sony's PC ports have a consistently high standard when it comes to taking snaps, and it all started with Aloy's first jaunt.



GHOST OF TSUSHIMA

Unsuited 13th-century Japanese countryside, a feature-rich camera, and only the occasional risk of decapitation.



RED DEAD REDEMPTION 2

Whereas actual frontier-era photography involved sitting very still for nine hours, *RDR2*'s camera options are bleeding-edge.



NO MAN'S SKY

If ever there was a universe worth photographing, it's one in which giant land-dwelling jellyfish-stegosaurus hybrids occur.



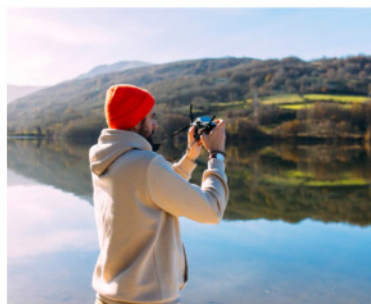
locations across the world map where the lighting and topography were just right to capture landscape shots or human subjects, manipulating the day-night cycle manually by resting, in order to get just the right light and shade for the scene.

ADMIRE THE SCENERY

But whereas that kind of hobbyism took place without developer support, nowadays using your graphical hardware to simply admire the scenery has become an engrossing and mechanically rich activity that studios spend resources on.

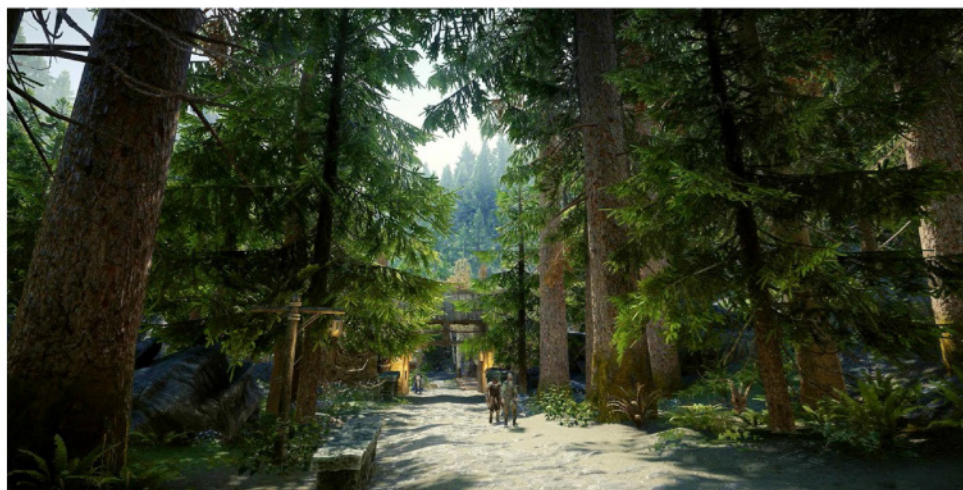
As *Call of Duty* and *Battlefield* don their futuristic kevlar gloves and their GoPro-mounted helmets ready to go to war for the online shooter spoils, perhaps one of the key fronts will be which game serves up a chance to actually enjoy all those SSD-thrashing 8K textures and complex soft shadows. However gratifying it might feel to lob a throwing knife or pilot a chopper, the best shooter is the one that also lets you use your GPU to its fullest in a passive role, not just boots on the ground. ■

Phil Iwaniuk



ABOVE: Being pounded by artillery fire really minimises the opportunities to take in the scenery.

BELOW: *Skyrim* photography is a pastime as old as these trees. They're really old.



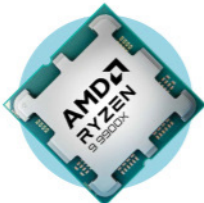
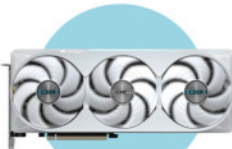
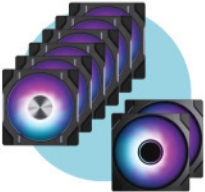
THE BUILD

Maximum airflow

By Zak Storey



TOTAL COST £3,120

1	COOLER  Panorama SE ARGB 360 Tryx £249 Big, bold and beautiful, Tryx reinvigorated the AIO market with the introduction of its first curved OLED AIO, and the Panorama SE takes things to the next level. Although cheaper than its predecessor, a lot of the bugbears that we initially had with the Panorama have been fixed with this later edition. Thanks to longer tubing, better affordability, a bigger display and broader compatibility with multiple orientations, it's now an absolute juggernaut of an AIO, complete with a full complement of RGB fans.		2	PROCESSOR  Ryzen 9 9900X AMD £335 If professional workloads are your thing, then this chip's 12 cores and 24 threads will suit your needs perfectly.					
		3	MOTHERBOARD  ROG Strix X870E-E Gaming WiFi Asus £430 This E-line board has outstanding connectivity and solid performance.						
		4	GRAPHICS CARD  Eagle OC ICE SFF RTX 5070 Ti 16G Gigabyte £807 Gigabyte's Eagle SFF cooler adds to the mix, keeping the size compact.						
9	FANS  M25G2-140 x6 PH-F140D30 x2 Phanteks £104 We're using a mix of reverse blade and the regular line, depending on what we need.	8	POWER SUPPLY  C1500 NZXT £269 The C1500 is perfect for future-proofing your machine with two 12VHPWR cables and a ton of additional headroom.	7	CASE  HS420 VGPU Havn £265 The HS420, comes equipped with curved glass, insane cooling support and a flashy vertical GPU setup.	6	SSDS  T710 2TB + WD Black SN850X 4TB Crucial & Sandisk £490 2TB of Crucial's finest PCIe 5.0 tech for our OS and 4TB of additional PCIe 4.0 storage.	5	MEMORY  Dominator Titanium DDR5-6400 32GB Corsair £171 With stellar performance and a lightbar kit, 32GB of this will take your PC to the next level.

YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick these parts if you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank



TOTAL
£1,067

MOTHERBOARD		B760M Steel Legend WiFi ASRock £150 This board is affordable, DDR5 ready, and packed with features, including Wi-Fi support straight out of the box.
PROCESSOR		Core i5 13400F Intel £120 Intel's budget 10-core chip from the Raptor Lake generation is still fantastic value and a solid all-rounder.
GRAPHICS CARD		Radeon RX 9060 XT 8 GB AMD £260 AMD delivers what we need for a 1080p gaming PC at a solid price, at least until even more budget GPU competition arrives.
COOLER		Laminar RM1 (included with CPU) Intel Free There's room for an upgrade here, but on a budget the included CPU cooler will work just fine.
MEMORY		Fury Beast 16 GB (2x 8 GB) Kingston £65 We've made the switch to DDR5 here, as DDR4 is a bit old fashioned in 2025 and cheap kits are plentiful
POWER SUPPLY		Pure Power 12 750W Be Quiet! £95 This 750W power supply gives you a decent dose of headroom for some future upgrades, from a trusted manufacturer.
SSD		SN7100 1 TB Western Digital £60 Superb 4K read performance for a reasonable price makes this a great drive for any gaming PC, never mind a budget one.
CASE		Zauron Aerocool £32 This Aerocool will let your components breathe and has space for further expansion and cooling.
DISPLAY		Gaming 27G4XE AOC £150 AOC make some surprisingly cheap and well-specced little gaming monitors, like this 180 Hz 1080p display for less
KEYBOARD		KM250 RGB G.Skill £55 It's actually mind blowing what you can pick up for this little cash: a hot-swappable USB mechanical board that looks lovely.
MOUSE		G305 Lightspeed Logitech £30 Even on a budget you can still grab a fantastic, ultra-rapid wireless squeaker like this one here.
HEADSET		HS55 Stereo Corsair £40 Corsair's budget wired cans are comfy and have a surprisingly excellent microphone for the money.
MOUSE PAD		MM100 Corsair £10 A simple black rectangle that can make a world of difference over no-name models, and it's almost as cheap, too.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games



TOTAL
£1,560

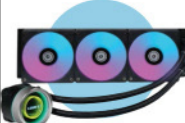
MOTHERBOARD		TUF Gaming B650-E Asus £144 A reliable motherboard with plenty of frills, including Wi-Fi 6E, 2.5Gb Ethernet, PCIe 5.0 for the SSD and USB-C on the back.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 7 7700X AMD £220 For the longevity offered by the AM5 socket, we're going for AMD's excellent eight-core Ryzen 7.
GRAPHICS CARD		RTX 5060 Ti Nvidia £400 Nvidia's RTX 50-series cards have been hard to find for good prices, but the 16 GB model is widely available, punchy, and affordable.
COOLER		Peerless Assassin 120 SE Thermaltake £35 It's a big beast, but it brings cooling performance to the table that's undeniably impressive.
MEMORY		Viper Venom DDR5-5600 16 GB Patriot £59 It might not have fancy RGB lighting, but this Patriot RAM certainly has the speed you need for less.
POWER SUPPLY		Pure Power 12 M 750W Be Quiet! £104 This larger Be Quiet! PSU offers a stable platform with PCIe 5.0 connectivity. At 750W, there's room for a GPU upgrade too.
SSD		NM790 2TB Lexar £113 The Lexar proves you can, sometimes, have it all: blazing speeds, cool operation, large capacity and a great price.
CASE		H7 NZXT £100 It's very clever of NZXT to design such an easy PC case to build into, and make it look so gorgeous too.
DISPLAY		PXC277 Advanced Pixio £200 The price of this Pixio, considering the 1440p resolution and 165 Hz refresh rate, is quite something.
KEYBOARD		KM250 RGB G.Skill £45 You could spend more for a full-size gaming keyboard, but this G.Skill will certainly suffice for most gamers.
MOUSE		DeathAdder V2 X Hyperspeed Razer £60 The regular V2 is great if you can find one, but this version delivers impeccable gaming performance for less.
HEADSET		Cloud Alpha HyperX £60 We're still not over the awesome audio quality and excellent comfort of the HyperX Cloud Alpha.
MOUSE PAD		G440 Logitech £20 This low-friction hard-top mouse pad with minimal branding offers the smoothest of glides for a reasonable price.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds



TOTAL
£5,996

MOTHERBOARD		MAG X870E Tomahawk MSI £300 With support for four M.2 drives, huge amounts of DDR5, Wi-Fi 7 and more, this mega mobo is specced to the hilt.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 9 9950X3D AMD £480 The Ryzen 9950X3D has more cores, but it's currently nearly double the price. For gaming? This chip makes much more sense.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 5090 Nvidia £2,180 The RTX 5090 price is ludicrous, but this is a money-no-object build and it's still the fastest GPU you can buy.
COOLER		Galahad II Trinity 360 Lian Li £164 Lian Li's Galahad is all about pure liquid cooling performance and it delivers this flawlessly.
MEMORY		Trident Z5 RGB (2x16GB) G.Skill £115 You could always go for 64 GB if you really want to show off, but 32 GB of speedy DDR5 is still a sweet spot.
POWER SUPPLY		Prime TX-1300 Seasonic £424 The RTX 5090 is a thirsty beast, so you'd better give it a serious power supply – and this one's similarly monstrous.
BOOT DRIVE		NM790 4 TB Lexar £234 With 4TB of storage, it's going to take one seriously big Steam library to get anywhere close to filling this drive up.
MOUSE PAD		Firefly V2 Pro Razer £100 Do you need an RGB mouse mat? If it makes you feel any better it's excellent for flick shots.
CASE		5000D Corsair £139 We swear this stylish mid-tower is bigger on the inside. It's the PC equivalent of the TARDIS.
DISPLAY		ROG Swift OLED PG32UCDM Asus £1,200 You could be much more sensible on your screen than this. For this build, however, we only want the best.
KEYBOARD		ROG Strix Scope II 96 Wireless Asus £170 We're keyboard snobs, and we can say with confidence that this full-sized Asus board is about as good as it gets.
MOUSE		DeathAdder V4 Pro Razer £170 The latest version of the DeathAdder isn't cheap, but when it comes to performance it's sensational.
HEADSET		Maxwell Audeze £320 Planar magnetic drivers make this headset pure heaven for audio fans. And everyone else, to be honest.

EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING



“I’ve seen fantastical mushroom villages and a detailed cottage”

MAKEROOM is a meditation in creativity, even if you’re not that creative

I’m not an interior designer, far from it, so I often shy away from decorating in games like *The Sims* or *Animal Crossing*. As long as it’s functional I don’t really care, and would rather focus on the more practical aspects. So, deciding to play cosy sandbox designing game *MakeRoom* might sound like a very odd choice for me at best, and a recipe for disaster at worst.

The whole goal of *MakeRoom* is to... design a room. You’re plonked into an almost blank slate where you can tweak everything from the layout, wallpaper and flooring, to placing items, effects, or changing the weather and soundscape. It was a lot to take in, and inspiration didn’t strike me, but I made a fireplace, a bedroom and a gamer station.

RORY NORRIS



THIS MONTH
Attempted to build
cute environments.

ALSO PLAYED
Battlefield 6 Open Beta,
Grounded 2

Since you can resize every single item and customise its colours, you’re able to get pretty creative. For example, I shrunk a car down to the size of a toy for a display stand. In fact, you can even make your own items from scratch, but that’s far too complicated for me. Luckily, you can download custom items other people have made through the Steam Workshop, making up for the limited selection of official items – though more are added in updates.

As I’d soon find out after leaving my tutorial sandbox, *MakeRoom* has

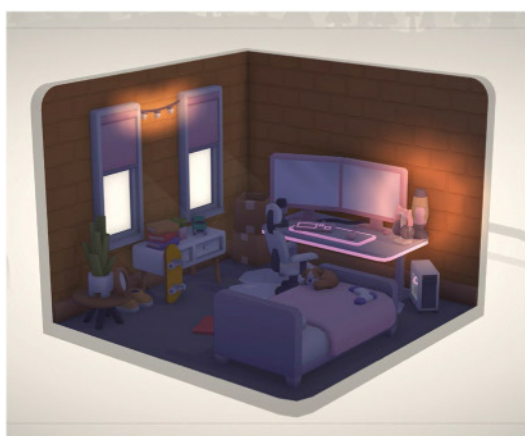
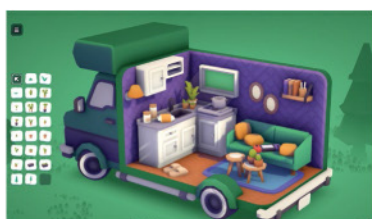
TOP: My first shot at designing in *MakeRoom*, so ignore the lack of cohesion and detail, please.

a lot more to offer. You can design cute and cosy gardens and campervans, you can complete requests, or start from a completely blank canvas. Feeling oddly overwhelmed by this supposedly calming sandbox, I actually left *MakeRoom* alone for a good while.

A MEDITATION

Sometimes, there’s nothing you need more than a stripped-back, somewhat objective-free game like *MakeRoom* to give yourself some breathing room. I booted it back up, but this time I browsed the requests – inspiration certainly failed to strike me yet again.

THERE’S NOTHING YOU NEED MORE THAN A SOMEWHAT OBJECTIVE-FREE GAME



Requests are scenarios for you to build off of, giving you a simple foundation on which to plonk down more items and change things based on a theme. There are some pretty fun ones, like improving someone's gaming setup, making a cat paradise, and even a place fit for a vampire.

I started with the gaming room, turning it from a clean and empty apartment to a gamer's den, with clothes on the floor, atmospheric lighting, and, of course, a fully RGB computer setup.

Pleased with my efforts in the request, I decided to tough it out and design a garden from scratch. I kept the space small, but I added a reading nook and a campfire amongst the wilderness, and two cats to populate it. Simple as it is, it was relaxing to build it, to go back and look at it now, and to imagine it better next time, and that's enough for me. It's a meditation, in a way.

Browsing *MakeRoom*'s Steam Workshop page, you can clearly create some incredible things if you're talented enough. I've seen fantastical mushroom villages, an apocalyptic overpass, an astonishingly detailed cottage – the list goes on. How they've done it, I have no clue, but it's inspiring nonetheless. ■



“All I saw was a lot of busywork”

Falling for the nostalgia trap in **RAGNAROK M: CLASSIC**

▶ DANIELLA LUCAS



THIS MONTH
Tasted the bitterness
of disappointment.

ALSO PLAYED
FFXIV, MTG Arena

Memories are fickle things – that great movie you remembered as a kid might not hold up today, or that ‘funny’ thing you did as a teen is suddenly really dangerous in hindsight. Annoyingly I fell trap to this phenomenon when I was lured back to fond memories of the early 2000s, dial-up screeches, and my first ever MMO, *Ragnarok Online*.

A mash-up of the original game with all the classic outfits, monsters and towns I was excited to dip a toe into the anime waters of *Ragnarok M: Classic*. Unfortunately ‘classic’ is doing a lot of heavy lifting, as this is basically exactly the same as the previous mobile version with a few tweaks to in-game currency. That's it. It is not the nostalgia-fest I wanted.

Things had started off OK – I made my cute, but basic character and set off on some early quests to slay adorable slime-like Porings and earn myself some weird hats. Part of the original *RO*'s charm was in showing off the insane headgear you could get, such as egg shells and glasses of apple juice. I merrily

picked up my first hat and transported myself back to my awkward teenage years and that heady excitement of starting your first MMO adventure.

HATS OFF

Things immediately started creaking when talking to people, and the lack of a grammar pass on the text made itself apparent. “We must hurry up and Growth to become a great adventurer!” my companion Cenia told me as I contemplated sending her back to redo her GCSEs before picking up a sword again.

It felt cheap, but I could deal with that until the quest rewards started tumbling in. But then I nearly tapped out on the spot. Despite the whole point of this game being that there's only one in-game currency you can spend your cash on, there's actually about 15 other tokens and coins to exchange for crafting materials and the like. It was an avalanche of mobile junk and all I saw was a lot of busywork. The nostalgia was a trap.

With a heavy sigh I said goodbye to the Porings, PecoPecos and that teenage version of myself filled with her first thirst for adventure. Some things are better left in the past. ■



“I already know the answer but, seriously, who put me in charge?”

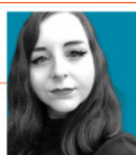
Dealing with heavy weather in **AGAINST THE STORM**

The harpies of my latest soggy settlement are not happy. Despite the endless, blighted rain stripping these feathered friends of their ability to fly generations ago, more of them take wing from my put-upon outpost every season. The cause of this collective exit? A lack of jerky.

Obviously, the harpies' unhappiness doesn't begin and end with jerky – it's just the cherry on the cake of their discontent. But add to that a lack of stimulating reading material, a severe shortage of coats to keep out the ever-present damp, plus almost no suitable housing, and it's clear the winged ones aren't just whining. I mean, my failure to stop that magical explosion last season also didn't really help with morale.

Neither the queen nor her similarly far from empathetic envoy will hear my excuses – so I'll bend your ear instead. To build harpy-specific housing, you need not just bricks, but bolts of fabric. A crude workstation can make both of those things – but I really need to focus those efforts on plank production as

▶ JESS KINGHORN



THIS MONTH
I became the best damn viceroy I can possibly be.

ALSO PLAYED
Umamusume, Shadow Gambit: The Cursed Crew

our ever-impatient queen wants a boatload of building materials. I could set up a weaver in a manufactory but that requires more planks than I can currently spare.

OK, so, if I can't keep the cold out with at least a dry coat or a roof over my townfolks' heads, how about a nice meal from the smokehouse? Again, that's more processed wood than I can spare, and it's little wonder my harpy population is beginning to resent just how far down the priority list their needs have fallen. I already know the answer but, seriously, who put me

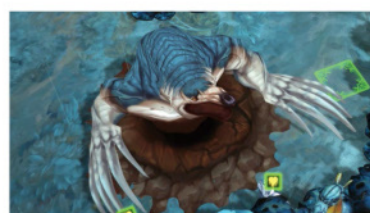
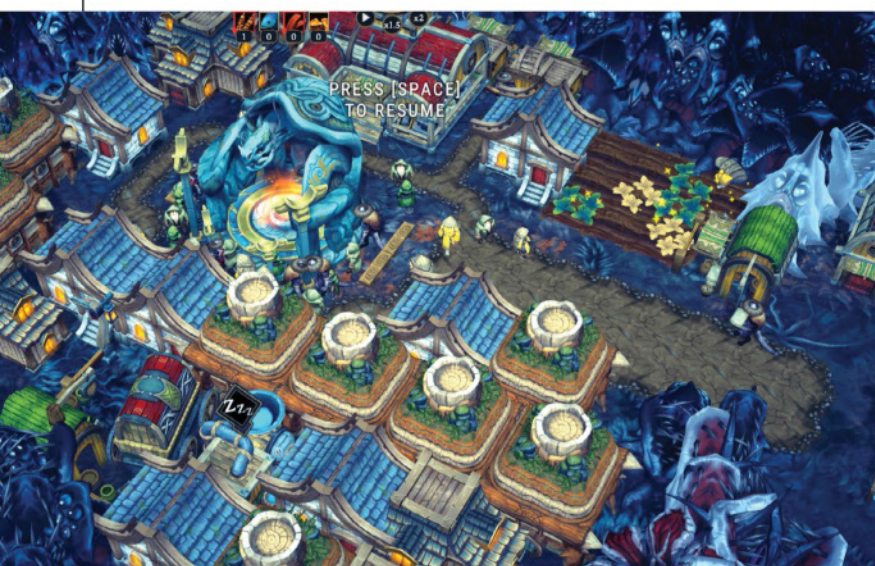
MY FAILURE TO STOP A MAGICAL EXPLOSION DIDN'T REALLY HELP WITH MORALE

in charge? Ah well, I'll make it up to my harpies next time.

INCLEMENT WEATHER

If you piss off your townsfolk one too many times or simply watch your queen's patience run out, it's not all over. You're never stuck staring down the prospect of untangling a costly or simply ugly civil planning mistake you made hours earlier either, as a cursed constant rain washes it all away in the end.

As you chop down the weird and wonderful wood that surrounds your settlement, you'll discover new glades. These can house both untapped resources and events that will demand your attention one way or another. I was slow in assigning workers to that event, and though I do feel a little guilty for the loss of lizards Vliess Emberbeard, alongside Krahisz and Dhesk Redtongue, *Against the Storm* gives your denizens very little personality at an individual level. I also know the regularly scheduled welcome wagon will bring me fresh faces, and besides all of that I'll be back to a clean slate before long as the Blightstorm washes away all of my mistakes. ■



LEFT: Do you reckon the queen will let us keep him?

BELOW: If you neglect your villagers' needs, they'll up and leave.





“I’ve been getting my arse kicked by this fusion of NES-era Metroidery”

Spelunking for platform shooter sickos in the Metroid-like **ZEXION**

If you’ve a taste for *Metroid*-inspired platforming, you are eating good this year. There’s dozens of great examples in 2025 alone. But one game – released this March by debuting solo developer Gallant Leaf – is developing a reputation as a dark horse pick among discerning *Metroid* sickos, despite humble appearances: *Zexion*.

Weighing in at a mere 30mb download, *Zexion* looks like an authentic, austere NES-era platformer. It even uses NES-accurate chiptunes for its brooding sci-fi soundtrack. But rather than just reheate *Metroid*, this is a rich, meaty stew of inspirations. *Metroid* and its exploration is the base, for sure, but it has *Mega Man*’s eye for gimmick-driven level design, and more than a dash of *Contra*’s eight-way aiming and screen-filling, multi-phase bosses, which you WILL die to. There’s an achievement for winning with less than 50 deaths, and you are unlikely to get it on your first run.

DOMINIC TARASON



THIS MONTH
Got nostalgic for all things *Metroid* and *Castlevania*.

ALSO PLAYED
Shuten Order, *Incision*

Outside of bosses, this is a tough game, assuming players are going to be scrounging up every ammo and health expansion to give them any edge in combat. As someone frequently disappointed by *Metroidvanias* that let you easily outgrow their difficulty curve, I do not regret dedicating some of my gaming time this month to getting my arse kicked into orbit by this weapons-grade fusion of NES-era *Metroid*-ery. And if that sounds intimidating, there’s a panel of

TOP: Battles in *Zexion* frequently escalate into surprising three-way brawls.

accessibility options to dial down the challenge to personal taste.

ARMS RACE

Intro and end sequence aside, the story is told wordlessly, with set-pieces happening around you as you explore, seldom interrupting the action. Enemy factions and rivals are introduced seamlessly, as you see them on their own adventures, collecting upgrades and racing you for the prize; a source of cosmic power that you need to save your planet.

What starts with you delving into a cave system with little more than a laser pistol escalates into what feels like a frantic sci-fi arms race, with some areas dominated by rolling battles between rival factions that hate each other even more than you.

It took me a solid eight hours to get through the main adventure, plus a couple more for some brutally hard bonus areas and super-bosses. And for the real *Metroid* freaks out there, the game has a built-in randomiser too, creating new routes through the whole game for extensive replay value. Highly recommended. ■

RATHER THAN JUST REHEAT METROID, THIS IS A MEATY STEW OF INSPIRATIONS

ELDEN RING: NIGHTREIGN

In Everdark Libra, I've finally met my match *By Elie Gould*

I've put over 160 hours into *Elden Ring: Nightreign*. I've completed all the remembrance quests, secured all the achievements and easily defeated all the Nightlords and their Everdark counterparts, well, all except one.

Everdark Libra is the latest edition to *Nightreign*, and he has lived up to all of my expectations. Being one of the hardest Nightlords, I was hoping to be presented with another challenging experience after waves of slightly underwhelming Everdark Sovereigns. These were meant to be the souped-up versions of the plain old Nightlords with a new third phase and even harder abilities, but I didn't find any of the others very hard.

So the first time I walked into Everdark Libra's boss room, I was expecting a tricky fight, but nothing too different from his original form, which I have managed to beat many times. The underestimation killed me.

I had already heard that Everdark Libra was a step up from the rest and that he could summon condemned versions of all the players to fight by his side as that battle commences, but my experience was even more chaotic than I could have ever imagined.

Usually, having a team of three is a great help during a boss battle, even if

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
May 29, 2025

DEVELOPER
FromSoftware

PUBLISHER
FromSoftware

LINK
shorturl.at/jl7lw

one player can't pull their weight, you'll at least get the respite of having the Nightlord aggroing someone other than you for a few seconds, long enough to take a swig of Estus. But fighting Everdark Libra in a trio is actually the hardest way you can go about taking the beast on.

Libra's biggest strength is its ability to continuously summon condemned fighters, depending on how many players are in a team, and they can be quite finicky to pin down and kill. My mimic summon rolled around so much during our scuffle that it felt like I was looking into a mirror; finally understanding how all those FromSoft bosses must have felt as I tumbled around clueless yet untouchable, and I did not like it.

CUBA LIBRA

Taking on one condemned per Nightfarer isn't an issue; the problem arises when someone fails to pull their weight and take out their counterpart. Libra won't wait around for you to exterminate all the condemned before calling in the next batch. At one point, I got jumped by

six of them with no real way to get out of the brawl. Needless to say, we didn't win that encounter.

Another attempt saw me struck down by the floods of Madness build up that Libra dishes out. As if the waves that he kicks up weren't enough, his new Everdark phase also adds a cloud of Madness that can

THE PROBLEM ARISES WHEN SOMEONE FAILS TO PULL THEIR WEIGHT

build up above you and eventually turn into an eye that deals continuous Madness buildup.

But no matter how hard the Libra fight may be, there's always a way around it. Just like his original Nightlord self, Everdark Libra is still affected by Madness. It may not be as apparent, especially during his new phase where he summons condemned and builds weird light walls everywhere, but it still works.

On my third attempt, I was able to defeat Libra, in what felt like two minutes. My team and I were all level 15, with about 180,000 grace to spare. We'd raided Noklateo for its secret: a revive that also grants you great power for a short period of time, and, crucially, we all had Vyke's War Spear.

My teammates and I took it in turns to hit Libra with the Madness-inflicted weapon, stunning him out of his ability to summon condemned and other incantations. It also whittled his health down so quickly, alongside other key weapons like Rivers of Blood, that I forgot I was in the midst of an Everdark fight.

Unfortunately, finding a Madness-inflicting weapon isn't guaranteed, so you do have to rely on RNG for this fight more than others. But trust me when I tell you, if you see a red dot appear on the screen, indicating a Madness Tower, then run towards it and grab all the Madness weapons and incantations you possibly can. ■

LIFESAVERS *Must have weapons*



VYKE'S WAR SPEAR
When in a Madness state, Libra cannot summon condemned and can even attack or be attacked by the remaining condemned.



ALABASTER LORD'S SWORD
Any weapon with an AOE effect is helpful in this fight, as there are so many people to take down. Cranial Vessel Candlestand also works well.

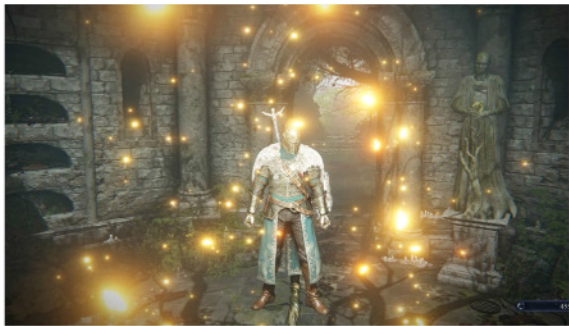


GODFREY'S AXE
This weapon gives hyper armour, can stagger the condemned with Regal Roar, and has a final hit that'll launch the rest of the condemned skyward.



RIVERS OF BLOOD
The skill can tear through the condemned, and the bleed proc usually finishes off low enemies.





ABOVE: Hyping myself up for another gruelling fight.





STAR WARS GENESIS

This full conversion is the perfect excuse to return to *Starfield*. *By Christopher Livingston*

No one is more surprised than me to report this bit of news: it's 2025 and I am playing *Starfield* again. To be clear, I'm not saying I didn't like *Starfield* when it launched in 2023. I did like it, and I played it for more than 100 hours! I just thought I was finished with it. It's a good game, but it's light years removed from the sort of staying power held by Bethesda RPGs like *Fallout 4* or *Skyrim*.

Less of a surprise: it's a cool mod that finally brought me back to *Starfield*, or to be more specific, a collection of several hundred cool mods that together form *Star Wars: Genesis*, a full conversion modlist that transforms *Starfield* into a big hunk of the Star Wars galaxy. Want to join the Imperial Navy and fly a

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Sept 5, 2023

PUBLISHER
Bethesda Softworks

DEVELOPER
Bethesda Game Studios

LINK
bethesda.net

TIE Fighter for the Empire? Want to pal around with R2D2 and make the jump to lightspeed in the Millennium Falcon? Want to race an X-34 landspeeder across Tatooine and fight some Tusken Raiders? You can do all of that in *Star Wars: Genesis*, and more.

Even the character creator feels like it's breathing new life into *Starfield*, because you can play as all sorts of alien races: Rodians (like Greedo), Trandoshians (like Bossk), Duros (the blue-headed dudes from the Mos Eisley cantina), Mon Calamari (it's a trap!), and a bunch more. Yes, you can even be a Gungan, if your dream has always



CONVERT ALERT

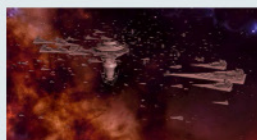
Other Star Wars total conversion mods



TIE FIGHTER TOTAL CONVERSION
A brilliant recreation of the original TIE Fighter in *Star Wars: X-Wing Alliance*.



STAR WARS CONQUEST
You wouldn't expect *Mount & Blade: Warband* to be the perfect sandbox for a Star Wars mod. But it is.



STAR WARS NEW DAWN
A complete overhaul of *Stellaris*, set in the time period following *Revenge of the Sith* and the start of the Galactic Civil War.



GALACTIC CONTENTION
With more than 20 maps, 150 units, and 25 vehicles, this mod converts the military FPS into a blast of a Star Wars shooter.



TOP: Join the Imperial Navy, fly a TIE Fighter, and be a stormtrooper.



been to inhabit Jar-Jar Binks. Just seeing all these alien character options makes me scratch my head at Bethesda's choice to go humans-only in *Starfield*. The company that made us fall in love with Argonians and Khajiit could have invented some awesome aliens, couldn't they? What a bizarre choice.

TATOOINE MACHINES

You can also choose your starting point, and it doesn't involve walking around in a tunnel mining ore for 30 minutes. Do you want to follow the main storyline, which, like *Starfield*, involves your discovery of a strange relic? If so, you can begin the game in the iconic city of Coruscant (which is standing in for *Starfield's* New Atlantis). You can also begin in an Imperial-controlled system like Geonosis or Port Haven, a rebel stronghold like Dantoo Town, or even just a random spot in the galaxy, if you're really daring.

There are loadouts to pick from too: start as a smuggler, stormtrooper, rebel pilot and even a bounty hunter or random citizen of the galaxy. All the Star Wars weapons and vehicles you could dream of are here in *Genesis*: Han Solo's heavy blaster, Boba Fett's carbine rifle, Chewie's Bowcaster, and dozens more. Buy, fly and modify the Falcon, X-Wings, TIE Fighters, and even those sleek and shiny Naboo starships. Walk through any space port or look through a vendor's stock and you'll immediately say, "Ooh, I want that bit of Star Wars technology".

I played as a Bith, one of those lightbulb-headed alien musicians from the cantina in A New Hope, naming myself Boba Fret (get it? Music? Fret? OK, it's not my strongest work). I stuck to the main story for a bit, but it's hard not to glance at the huge star map and want to peel off and go exploring. I quickly jumped my way over to the Tatoo system and landed at Mos Eisley, which I think old Ben Kenobi oversold as a wretched hive of scum and villainy. It's a really nice place, honestly! Even for a lapsed Star Wars fan, just strolling around the spaceport is delightful, spotting a gonk droid here or a Bantha there, seeing an Ithorian (those hammerhead aliens), spotting a dewback (the stormtrooper's ride of choice in the desert), being greeted

excitedly by a small pack of Jawas. What a hefty dose of nostalgia this modlist is, and what a welcome change from the mostly generic sci-fi feel of *Starfield*.

HYPER SPACES

It's not just a bunch of cosmetic changes, either: there's definitely been some tweaks to combat. While tearing across the Tatooine desert in my X-34 landspeeder (the same one Luke drove), I ran into an Imperial mining station guarded by several stormtroopers. I happily engaged them with my DL-44 blaster, but these troopers were no pushover. Sure, a good headshot will drop an enemy quickly, but you're also no laser-sponge yourself. The combat is what I'd call tough but fair. You do a reasonable amount of damage to enemies, but they do the same to



A WELCOME CHANGE FROM THE GENERIC SCI-FI FEEL OF STARFIELD

you. Our favourite Star Wars heroes may have plot armour, but you don't. I like it. It makes me think twice before I begin popping off at every Imperial I see.

Space travel is bursting with Star Wars stuff, too. After buying a Corellian YT-1300 light freighter (the Falcon, in other words) I was jumping around between systems and I wound up in orbit around an Imperial-controlled planet. Star Destroyers closed in on either side of me. They didn't attack, but it sure felt like a real Star Wars moment to me. Awesome.

I won't lie and tell you Star Wars *Genesis* is an easy download and install. I mean, I could, but then the reality of the experience would see you soon get mad. You're looking at more than 50GB of files on top of *Starfield's* 100GB, and there's a long, long list of instructions you'll have to follow precisely or the mods won't run. Even with the excellent modlist manager Wabbajack, it's a bit of a beast to get up and running, but it's absolutely worth it. It got me to do something I'm not sure I ever would have done otherwise, though: play *Starfield* again. ■



GET STARTED IN

HOLLOW KNIGHT: SILKSONG

Brave Pharloom's lofty heights and big bug bosses. *By Sean Martin*

NEED TO KNOW

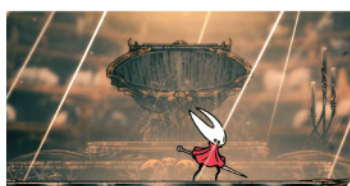
DIFFICULTY
Hard

TIME
20 hours

VITAL LINKS

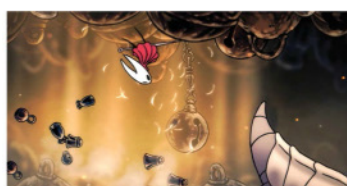
How to unlock Act 3:
pcgamer.com/games/action/silksong-act-3-unlock

Upgrade your needle:
pcgamer.com/games/action/silksong-pale-oil-needle-upgrade



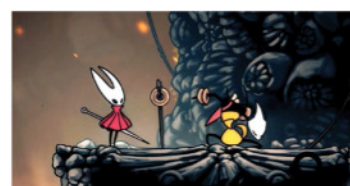
SILKY SMOOTH

1 The first thing you need to know about in *Silksong* is Silk. You can accumulate this resource by whacking enemies with your needle, but it's vital for healing and using Silk Skills once you get some. It means that you need to stay relatively aggressive in combat.



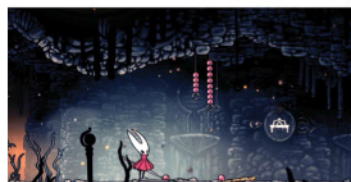
POGO

2 One of the best attacks is the pogo. Anyone who played *Hollow Knight* knows that a midair downward attack that bounces you off an enemy (or a 'pogo') is the most vital skill in the game. It gives you aerial mobility and you'll have to use it in platforming puzzles as well.



MAPPING

3 Once you meet Shakra, you can buy a map for the first two regions and a compass, then every region below The Citadel after. If you don't find Shakra in each region, fear not; you can summon her on the upper right side of Bone Bottom to buy any missed maps.



ROSARIES

4 The only problem is that you'll need Rosaries to purchase items in *Silksong*. You can get these from humanoid bug enemies that you kill, but be careful when you die. If you don't smash your cocoon, and die again, you'll lose them all.



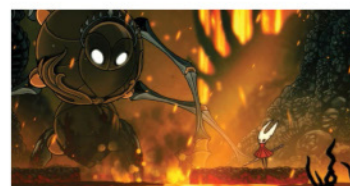
TOOLED UP

5 Another use for Rosaries is purchasing tools. These are similar to charms from *Hollow Knight*, granting you powerful effects, but they also function as gadgets. You'll first be able to buy them from Forge Daughter in the lower Deep Docks.



WELL CRESTED

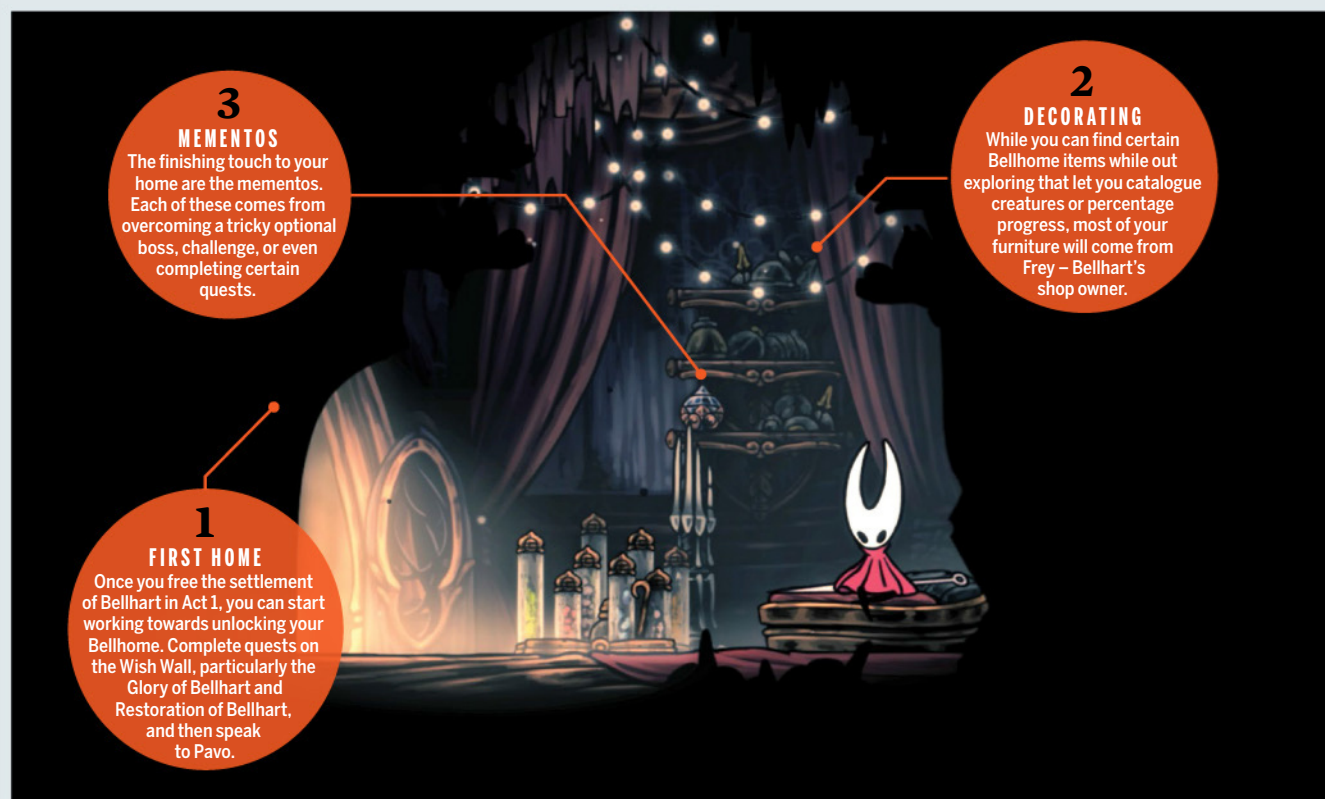
6 An additional way to change up combat is to find a Crest. These tweak your tool loadout and moveset, and often grant an ability when you heal. If you purchase the Simple Key from Pebb and gain the Swift Step ability, you can access the Wanderer Crest.



THE FLOOR IS LAVA

7 Most of *Silksong*'s bosses and gauntlets are all about avoiding enemies and hazards in the space. If you want to survive, positioning is vital, so remember to use all of your movement abilities if you're facing a particularly tricky boss or group of enemies.

BELL SWEET BELL *Decorate your very own Bellhart home*



3

MEMENTOS

The finishing touch to your home are the mementos. Each of these comes from overcoming a tricky optional boss, challenge, or even completing certain quests.

2

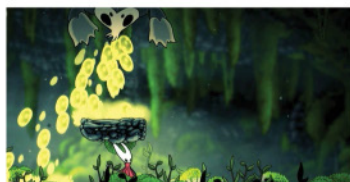
DECORATING

While you can find certain Bellhome items while out exploring that let you catalogue creatures or percentage progress, most of your furniture will come from Frey – Bellhart's shop owner.

1

FIRST HOME

Once you free the settlement of Bellhart in Act 1, you can start working towards unlocking your Bellhome. Complete quests on the Wish Wall, particularly the Glory of Bellhart and Restoration of Bellhart, and then speak to Pavo.



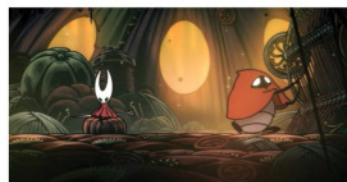
COME BACK LATER

8 Many of *Silksong's* bosses and areas are optional, letting you run away to gather strength and new tools to make yourself stronger. A lot of bosses are also easily overcome if you take a moment to strategise, so don't be afraid to formulate plans and experiment.



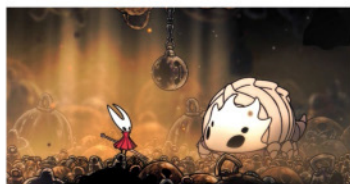
WISH WALL

9 Another thing you can do instead of bashing your head against bosses is completing wishes. These new quests appear on boards in each town called Wish Walls and often grant rewards in the form of Rosary Strings or Shard Bundles. As you complete them, more will appear.



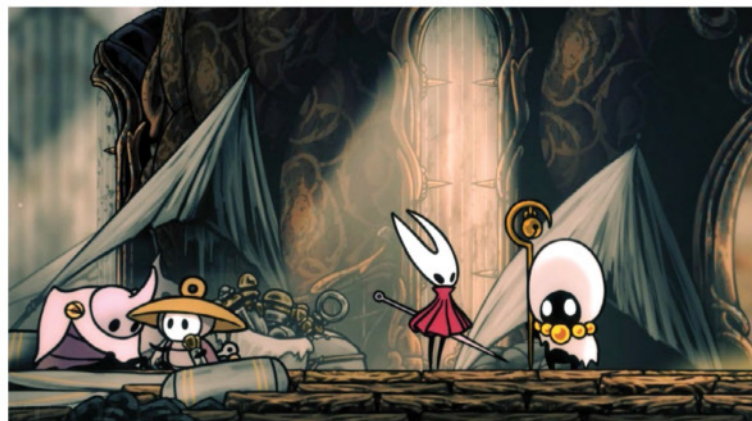
BENCHES

10 Resting at benches is how you set checkpoints, and it's especially important in *Silksong*, a game that hides benches, traps them, or makes you either pay Rosaries or complete little puzzles to fix them. Always carry a Rosary String with you while exploring.



FAST TRAVEL

11 Besides benches, there's also fast travel in *Silksong*. For the lower reaches of Pharloom, you'll have to open Bellways once you've defeated the Bell Beast in The Marrow, but when you arrive in The Citadel, you'll also unlock the Ventrica – its own transit system.



THERE'S MORE??

12 *Silksong* has a third act you can unlock if you fulfil certain requirements. These are all listed in the guide linked at the start and aren't actually that complex provided you've been finishing Wish Wall quests.



THE ART OF ILLUSION IN THE ELDER SCROLLS IV: OBLIVION REMASTERED

PART 2

Jumping to illusions: the continued misadventures of Crispin the Preposterous

By Matt Elliott



When last we saw our friend Crispin the Prespofterous, he was experiencing a crisis of confidence. Can you really call yourself Tamriel's greatest illusionist with two naff spells, great hair, and a complete disregard for property rights? Almost certainly not. This entry, then, is an exercise in proving his worth. He's not just a spellcaster who can steal and cast Starlight. He has layers. A magical onion. And he'll prove his worth to the Mages Guild, if only to convince himself that his entire existence isn't an outrageous lie.

We left Crispin in Bravil, a festering swamp town to the south of Cyrodiil that's only marginally better than being in prison. It's probably the best place in the game to learn illusion spells, but, as ever, there's an issue: Crispin has the skills to cast some impressive stuff, but not the coin. Buying spells is expensive for a penniless mage straight out of the slammer. So it makes sense to stay here, grind some more quests, and fence some equipment on the sly when things get tight.

SLUMBER YARD

I've already done the quest needed to earn a Bravil recommendation. Getting these from all the Mages Guilds in Cyrodiil will allow me to access the Arcane University. Hopefully, the imposter syndrome will disappear the moment he gets the keys to the Council Chambers. That's a long way off, though. In the meantime, it makes sense to stay in Bravil and earn the cash needed to complete my quest. To that end, I decided to take on the excellently named Through A Nightmare, Darkly quest for an Argonian called Kud-Ei. Her friend, Henantier, has carelessly got himself trapped inside a dream, like the love interest in an '80s high-fantasy film. Kud-Ei needs my help getting him out. This will be easy; I'll sashay into Henantier's dream and demand he wakes the hell up using my coruscating personality. Simple.

It is not simple. First of all, I end up sleeping for 15 hours without entering his dream, because I missed the bit about putting on the special Dreamworld Amulet. At one point I convince myself that I am in the dream

because the windows look different, and I step outside expecting it to be a clever ruse, rather like Skyrim's Waking Nightmare quest. And when I finally make it into the dream, it gets worse. Apparently persuasion won't be enough. I need to do a series of quests. And, more pertinently, I can't use my magic. And I'm naked. If we're sticking strictly to the rules, that leaves me precisely zero offensive options. I can only hope that none of the quests require combat.

The opening quest, of course, requires combat. My first hint that I might be in trouble is the door to the Test of Resolve, which resembles a butcher's chopping

I'M TRAPPED IN A STRESS DREAM WITH NOTHING TO DO BUT RUN AND JUMP

block with a handle in it. On the other side is a tiny arena with two minotaurs and no way to fight them. I spend about five minutes running in circles, trying to find a hidden lever that will let Crispin out, but it doesn't exist. It's fight or die. But then I notice a wonky pillar that I'm able to clamber up. If I can jump far enough, I'll be able to reach an elevated platform and circumvent the fight entirely, which feels like a very Crispin way to solve this problem. In the last entry I jokingly suggested that we add a 'no jumping' rule, but I'm rolling back on that with the force of a thousand hurricanes. Unfortunately, my acrobatics skill is only 20 points. But let's be honest: I'm trapped in an eternal stress dream with nothing to do but run and jump. If there was ever a time to fortify my acrobatics skill, it's now.

GAMBOL RESPONSIBLY

About 90 minutes later – and honestly, I wish I was joking – my acrobatics skill hits 50 and I'm still nowhere near making the jump. Worse, all that time spent running in literal circles and jumping around has given me actual motion sickness. I pause, have an IRL rest (no enemies nearby, thankfully), and reevaluate my situation.

I work out that it will take me literal hours to solve this problem, so I search for a plan B. Plan B is reloading an old save and not taking on this cursed mission in the first place, which I absolutely refuse to do. Plan C is exploring the chest right at the start of the quest that I somehow managed to ignore completely and walk past.

Inside are weapons, armour and a lightning staff. The first two are completely prohibited by the rules, but I'm going to allow the latter.

I'm not proud of it, but it's a necessary evil. It's that or write another 1,000 words about jumping and running, which I'm sure nobody here wants. I blast the minotaurs and escape the area with a renewed sense of shame and a surprising aptitude for gymnastics.

THE RULES

1. Illusion only. Spells from any other class are forbidden.
2. No fighting whatsoever. And that includes unarmed combat.
3. No armour. You're an illusionist. Magic is your only protection.



Crispin keeps a dutiful watch over his guildmates while they sleep. It's not weird.

» The rest of the quests are laughably simple compared to being chased by minotaurs until I almost vomit. One has me stumbling past a series of traps so obvious that a crushed mudcrab could easily avoid them. The next has me swimming through an underwater tunnel; the sort of thing that brings me out in a cold sweat when I see someone doing it in real life, but here it's as simple as necking a potion and pressing up. The final task, the Test of Patience, involves remembering a path through a maze of trapped floor panels. This one might be tricky had I not just spent the last two hours building the quadriceps of whatever the Tamriel equivalent of a kangaroo is. I simply ignore the puzzle and sail harmlessly over the top of the darts, which is the most impatient way to pass a test of patience. I finally make it out of the dream and complete the quest, and Henantier rewards me with some garbage scrolls. I'm sadly not quick enough to drop the amulet, which I had planned on selling for a sweet 1,000 Septims, before he can swipe it back. Let's move on.

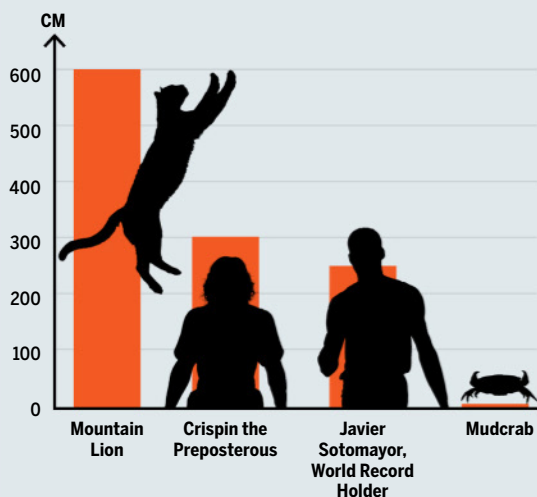
MAN BITES COG

Demoralised by this miserable experience, I decide to do something that feels cerebral, slow, and involves precisely zero minotaurs. I discover a juicy Arcane University quest that's been sat in my log the entire time, which I'd apparently missed when I stormed out in a huff after being refused admission. It involves finding parts of an orrery which has been stolen by bandits. I feel like even Crispin can deal with the sort of bandit who'd be timid enough to steal a mechanical model of the Solar System, so I pack some cheese wheels and head north, confident that my magnificent array of Illusion spells – charm, frenzy and calm – will be enough to deal with any trouble I meet along the way. I am once again chased across the map by wolves; an experience that reveals a crucial flaw in my abilities: calm only works temporarily.

Yes, I can bathe them in a calming green glow that stops them biting me, but they inevitably start chasing me again. Worse still, I have nothing that works on humans. I make it to the bandit camp and end up in a pickle, surrounded by two enemies I can't fight and three wolves who, it appears, are no longer calm. But salvation is at hand! Crispin's incredible jumping skill allows him to

ACROCADABRA!

How high can a cowardly illusionist jump?



take shelter on top of a nearby rock. Once again, illusion spells are the least reliable part of Crispin's skill set. I leave the wolves and bandits to fight it out, safe on the peak of Mount Preposterous. The bad news is that there's one bandit left to fight, and I have to tease him back to a nearby town so a guard can kill him. The worse news is that he only has one part of the orrery: there are four more camps to find, and all the confidence I had has evaporated after this miserable attempt to recover the first cog. I need another option.

I head back to Bravil, determined to buy a spell I can actually use. And, once again, it's time to raid the equipment shelf again and 'borrow' some supplies. Crispin lifts every soul gem, alchemy tool, and weighty tome, then lumps it over to The Fair Deal to sell. And, for once, illusion is actually useful: I charm the vendor to get a better deal, edging my way towards that worthwhile purchase. If the Mages Guild didn't want me to steal their stuff and sell it to all of the nearby shops, they shouldn't have taught me to trick vendors.

INVISIBLE PLAN

I've got enough money now, but I need a plan. I think about what Crispin would do. He's an inveterate coward. A jellyfish in a velvet doublet. A man who sneaks where possible, steals at will, and literally jumps away from conflict. All this leads me to believe there is an obvious choice for him: invisibility. It's the Temu version of the more powerful Chameleon spell, in that it does temporarily hide me, but Crispin will become visible again if I perform any actions. But it should be enough to get close enough to steal back the parts of the orrery, even if I immediately reappear with my pilfering hands in their pockets.

After an hour of trying to jump off this pillar, I think the minotaurs are learning.





WITH THIS SPELL I'VE BECOME THE OBLIVION EQUIVALENT OF SPRING-HEELED JACK

And, as a bonus, it'll stop me getting chased everywhere by wolves.

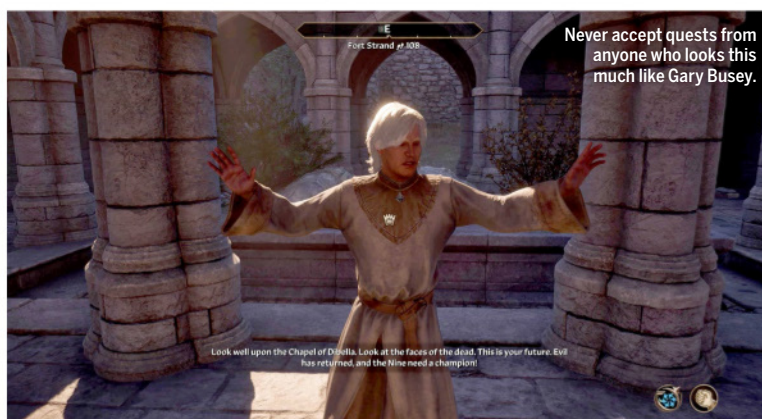
Now, I know what you're expecting. I normally set up these moments only for the next paragraph to start with an anecdote about how and why it failed. But, against all my expectations, it worked. It's brilliant. I can phase in and out of combat, and help myself to any useful stuff while I'm rummaging invisibly in my enemies' pockets. Yes, I reappear the second I do so. But I can just disappear again immediately and/or jump onto a nearby rock to tease them. By purchasing this spell I've become a creature of folklore: the *Oblivion* equivalent of Spring-heeled Jack, stealing people's belongings before bounding out of view. It's laughable, despicable cowardice, and obviously the most Crispin way to play *Oblivion*. Better still, it's the first Illusion spell that's actually useful. It's intoxicating. I imagine a world not just of invisibility and temporarily charmed dogs, but of creatures and

humans under my command. I want more. I collect all the missing parts, return to the Arcane University, and bag myself a sweet 600 Septims. And, in doing so, a plan begins to coalesce. My experiences have taught me that off-the-shelf spells won't work. And the only way to use illusion magic effectively is to make my own. To do so, I need to gain access to the Arcane University.

Luckily, I'm well on my way to getting all the Mages Guild recommendations, and I've already ingratiated myself to them by returning the missing orrery.

It's likely to be a slog, but whatever happens can't be worse than the Seventh Circle of Being Chased By Goddamn Minotaurs. And at least there are plenty of alembics to 'borrow'... ■

ABOVE: Nothing about this door suggest that it's a mission Crispin can handle.

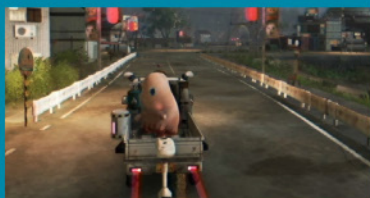




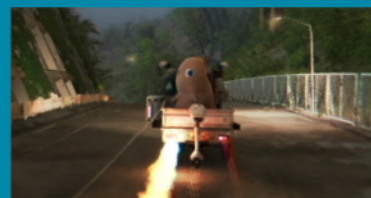
DRIVING AROUND ODDBALL JAPAN IN PROMISE MASCOT AGENCY

Bring me that horizon

By Jody Macgregor



FAR LEFT: Upgrading the boat mode gives Pinky a sailor's hat.



Everything in Japan has a mascot. Towns, sports, corporations, train stations – even prisons have mascots themed around local delicacies. In *Promise Mascot Agency*, those mascots aren't just people dressed as a baby otter with a tortoise for a hat. Every big pink cat or walking block of tofu you see is a real living being who has to earn a living by opening shops and cultural events.

It's your job as an exiled yakuza with the same voice actor and off-the-charts unflappability as Kazuma Kiryu from the *Like a Dragon* games to manage those mascots, assigning them jobs, negotiating bonuses and bailing them out when things go bad.

I've heard *Promise Mascot Agency* called a 'chore game' which doesn't do it any favours, but pointing out that it's an open world collectathon probably doesn't help either. Ubisoft-style open worlds and the grindy JRPGs *Promise Mascot Agency* is geographically adjacent to have devalued the genre's currency. This take on the genre's different enough to make me enjoy it again, though.

TRUCKY CHARMS

Your truck's important. It's indestructible for starters. There's no reason not to drive right off a cliff if you'd rather take a direct route than follow a winding road. The truck's even aquatic if you can't be bothered finding a bridge. I spent a lot of time hooning over hills as the physics flipped out and Pinky, the mascot in the truck, screamed in terror.

Did I mention you're doing all this with a mascot on the flatbed who is

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
April 10, 2025

DEVELOPER
Kaizen Game Works

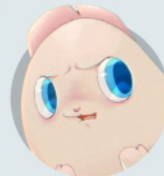
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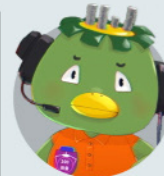
MONDO MASCOTS *Weirdos you'll wrangle*



FUJIN-KUN
A wind god and all-round breezy dude.



PINKY
Ironically, she does not have pinky fingers.



MONOUGE
Voiced by PlayStation vet Shuhei Yoshida.



CAPTAIN SIGN
Was bitten by a radioactive road safety pamphlet.

shaped like the severed fingertip of a shamed yakuza, by the way?

Upgrade blueprints turn the truck into an unstoppable nitro-boosting traversal juggernaut – once you recover them from fox spirits who have stolen them from the local mechanic, of course – but even at the start of the game the truck can jump for no reason other than it would be annoying if it couldn't.

Rather than boring repeatable activities being scattered across the map, instead you just find stuff: recruitable mascots, songs for the soundtrack, stamps for your tourism stamp book, collectables to finish various sidequests and billboards you

surprise, I was in the latter mood so often I got all the achievements.

LIVE A DRIVE

It took me a while to realise I was enjoying this particular open world more than the last few I played because of the lack of combat. Being able to explore freely without having to worry about getting swooped by whatever annoying flying enemy a game's decided to fill itself with really does make things more fun.

The one frustration is that sometimes you're called out of the blue to help a mascot out of a job-related jam by playing a card game. Said card game is a bit too simple to support the multiple screens of repeated hoo-ha you have to skip through to get to it each time.

Fortunately you don't have to engage with these the second they pop up and can put them off until you're ready, and even if you ignore them completely you'll just lose some of that job's rewards. They're an annoying interruption but not a fatal one, and by the late game I was drowning in consumable items.

There's an entire visual novel's worth of engaging story in *Promise Mascot Agency*, but the main thing I've taken away from 25 hours with it is that I'd really enjoy tootling around the countryside in a fuel-efficient little truck. ■

THE TRUCK'S EVEN AQUATIC IF YOU CAN'T BE BOTHERED FINDING A BRIDGE

can smash that advertise the corrupt mayor, which makes me glad someone's remembered the best thing about *Burnout Paradise*.

Almost all these things can be grabbed without slowing down. You can either swerve past a few on your way to somewhere important or dedicate your evening to gobbling up an entire corner of the map's worth if you're in that kind of mood. To my



LEFT: A scenic bamboo forest I'm about to drive right into.





REINSTALL

OLD GAMES, NEW PERSPECTIVES

Pillars is a rare game that I've loved more with each playthrough



PILLARS OF ETERNITY

Finally getting good at the Obsidian classic after 250 hours. *By Ted Litchfield*

They've started calling me the Stoic Gamer on account of how often I respond to tense situations, even crucial moments of my life with the dialogue option '[Stoic] Stay Silent'. Maybe not the best move in every circumstance, but *Pillars of Eternity's* personal reputation system has made it one of very few RPGs where I ever roleplay something other than A Nice Guy Who's Funny Sometimes – me in real life, but also a magical orc.

I was a Kickstarter backer on *Pillars* all the way back in 2012 when it was Obsidian's Hail Mary to stay afloat as a company, then titled *Project Eternity*. You can take that as my social media era admission of a conflict of interest, but truth is, I found my investment resulted in a

game that was hard to love on its 2015 release. *Pillars of Eternity* is brainy, dry, esoteric, and in possession of some of the most complex, high skill-ceiling mechanics I've seen in an RPG. I was immediately won over by its gorgeous visuals and unique atmosphere at launch, but it's taken multiple playthroughs, 250+ hours, and me putting the finishing touches to my adult brain after the age of 25 to fully appreciate everything going on thematically and mechanically in *Pillars of Eternity*.

CIPHER SUPREMACY

The first part of a *Pillars* replay for me has always been a wiki and forum deep dive, setting up various builds and selecting weapons before once again making a Cipher, a class unique to *Pillars of Eternity* and one of my favourites in any RPG. Ciphers are characterised as psychic detectives,

operatives who blend psionic powers with the utility and flexibility of a Rogue. As fits the theme, their spells focus on mental effects, nontraditional area of effect shapes, and a helpful avoidance of friendly fire. Some of my go-tos include Whispers of Treason, a cheap charm spell, Mental Binding, a powerful paralyse, and Psychovampiric Shield, which lowers an enemy's defences to improve your own.

But Ciphers actually begin fights with only a minimal amount of Focus, their class-appropriate spellcasting juice. You generate Focus by attacking enemies with weapons, a

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2015

DEVELOPER
Obsidian

PUBLISHER
Paradox

LINK
store.steampowered.com



Make a wish.



» Soul Whip effect improving your damage while siphoning power from enemies. This lends Ciphers a unique rhythm, using weapon DPS to build up to powerful spellcasting effects.

Coupled with their theming as spies or investigators, Ciphers have this incredible class fantasy, as well as one of the best mechanical realisations I've ever seen of a Mage-Thief archetype. I just can't bring myself to play as another class in *Pillars*, even as its versions of the Paladin, Monk and Bard (Chanter) stand out as particularly inspired in their own right

– thankfully the sequel added multiclassing to help me branch out.

I did mix things up a bit this time, though, opting for a build with dual sabres for melee DPS, and a blunderbuss for opening fights with ranged burst damage on enemy back row targets like mages. Going melee mode as a Cipher has been a revelation: not only is it just more fun to get in the middle of the action instead of standing back and plinking with a bow like I used to, the high damage of sabres is actually letting me build more Focus to get my spells off at a faster rate than ever before.

HARD TIMES

Which is good, because I've finally bumped the difficulty up from Normal to Hard after ten years of playing and replaying this game. Even compared to hardcore classics like the OG *Baldur's Gate* it's based on, *Pillars'* tangle of resistances, immunities, and status effects, all filtered through the often difficult to parse jumble of real time with pause combat, has left it one of the most challenging RPGs I've ever played.

I feel like I've finally gotten a grip on all of that – I might even be ready for the max-difficulty Path of the Damned next time around – and I'm just so impressed with how elegant *Pillars'* systems really are. It turns out I always had the tools to deal with the fights that gave me the most grief, I just wasn't paying enough attention.

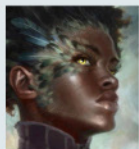
Companion Wizard Aloth can quickly access AOE confusion and blindness spells that are the key to winning difficult group encounters early on. My Cipher, meanwhile, is a Swiss army knife for dealing with the game's challenges: Charming enemy bruisers or even full-on bosses has trivialised fights that ruined me on easy mode ten years ago, while I was always supposed to

PARTY POLITICS *Pillars'* cast doesn't get enough credit



EDÉR

Lovable farm boy. Tied with Aveline in *Dragon Age 2* as the best tank in gaming history.



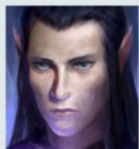
PALLEGINA

Avian paladin with a prickly demeanor. Can smite with guns as well as with swords.



ZAHUA

Stoner monk with an achingly tragic backstory and some of my favourite dialogue ever.



ALOTH

Shares a brain with an ancient peasant woman with a foul mouth. The two could talk more.



DURANCE

Kreia from *KotOR 2*, but also Rasputin. A human male priest and healer. Problematic fav.



GRIEVING MOTHER

A Cipher, that's the closest word. Comes with another achingly tragic backstory.



ABOVE: Every dungeon needs some ambience.

RIGHT: These machines are tied to an ancient conspiracy.



channel my frustration at getting paralysed all the time into paralysing spam of my own. When I struggled with accuracy against enemies, I was always able to debuff them into submission. *Pillars* was challenging to me because I didn't understand it. Now that I've achieved a level of mastery, it's firmly one of my favourite RPGs. *Pillars of Eternity* is a rare game that I've loved more with each playthrough.

STRANGE SHORES

Pillars' sequel, *Deadfire*, rightly gets a lot of praise for its portrayal of colonialism, telling a story that's politically and historically grounded without being ham-fisted. But I've always thought the first game never gets its flowers in this regard: *Pillars of Eternity* is smart fantasy, and every time I've seen a reviewer call it generic or Tolkeinesque, I've died a little bit inside.

Eora is more firmly rooted in a specific era and its technology than many fantasy settings, closer to *A Song of Ice and Fire* than *The Forgotten Realms*, but with the early modern period, rather than medieval times. The look of it all, meanwhile, is so thoroughly *Pillars*, and it's not just the gorgeous pre-rendered

NOW THAT I'VE ACHIEVED A LEVEL OF MASTERY, IT'S ONE OF MY FAVOURITE RPGS

backgrounds that have aged better than many of its contemporaries. The art of *Pillars* is simultaneously grounded, historical and realistic, but also vibrant and dreamlike: you'll be in a thatched roof Baldur's Berg one minute then find yourself exploring an ancient city of living rock the next.

Meanwhile, *Deadfire's* handling of colonialism was presaged by themes in the first game. The setting of the Dyrwood feels like a fantasy counterpart to early America, with a similar mythology of freedom, individualism and revolution against a distant monarch belied by the dispossession of a native people. It makes for a fascinating, complicated setting, unique in the field of CRPGs.

WHEEL OF REBIRTH

I'm about 30 hours into my playthrough at the time of writing, with a ton of game still left to chew through. The addition of *The White March* expansion increases *Pillars'* runtime by at least a third, and while

an essential part of the game, its marathon length has me contemplating a mid-campaign break before coming back with fresh eyes. But still, I think I'll be able to slip back into the role of my Stoic Cipher like a favourite pair of jeans.

Down the line? I'll be continuing his adventures into *Deadfire*. I've got my eye on a pretty gnarly-looking Rogue/Cipher multiclass build to continue that glass cannon, DPS/crowd control playstyle I've become so smitten with. I may finally dabble with *Deadfire's* turn based combat mode, an experimental addition I should prefer by default, but that's never seemed to have been as widely embraced by the community. A similar turn-based update is set to come to the first game later this year.

Zooming out further, the future of Eora seems brighter than it's been in a hot minute thanks to the apparent success of *Avowed*, but we're far more likely to see the continuation of that first person spinoff than another entry in the tactical, isometric series it was based on. If you'd asked me ten years ago, I probably would have preferred *Avowed* to *Pillars of Eternity*. These days? Give me crunch, complexity and Cipher paralyse spam every time. ■

KARA PHILLIPS



Between scaling mountains and racing horse girls this month, I've been learning to slow down and appreciate the pace of foraging, farm life and fishing. A new hobby absolutely hates to see me coming.



UMAMUSUME: PRETTY DERBY

umamusume.com

➔ If anime horse girls aren't enough to sell the game on its own, then the deep strategy that goes into training them might. It's not just about cute characters, it's about hard graft to make sure you're the fastest Uma on the track. The idol concerts at the end are a huge plus as well.



PEAK

landfall.se/peak

➔ Gather your friends and attempt to scale perilous environments. Will you help each other along the way, or race to the top and leave others in your dust? I've experienced it all in *Peak*, and it shows your pals' true colours. There's no feeling quite like finally seeing the sun rising.



HELLO KITTY ISLAND ADVENTURE

hellokittyislandadventure.com

➔ It's every girl's dream to befriend Hello Kitty and this game lets you do exactly that. It's the satisfaction and comfort of a game like *Animal Crossing* without being in constant debt. You just can't go wrong. Cook, craft and come together with all your Sanrio companions.



OUT AND ABOUT

yaldigames.com/outandabout

➔ This digital guide to foraging is essential to anyone curious about living off the land. I'm always paranoid about poisoning my friends, so it's nice to have such a hands-on way to learn about how to not do that. All the in-game recipes can be recreated in real life too.

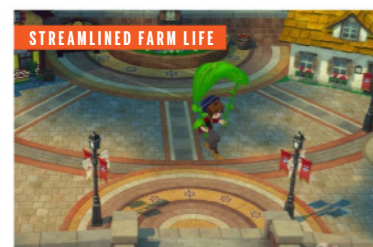
MUST

★

PLAY

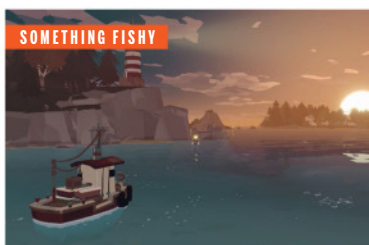
A PERSONAL LIST
OF THE BEST
GAMES YOU CAN
PLAY RIGHT NOW

by Kara Phillips

STORY OF SEASONS:
GRAND BAZAAR

storyofseasons.com/grandbazaar

➔ This faithful remake breathes a new life into *Grand Bazaar*, and I've fallen head over heels for it. It takes a lot for a farming sim to earn such high praise from me, but I adore this one. I've spent hours upon hours earning my keep in Zephyr Town.



DREDGE

dredge.game

➔ A little boat out in open waters, what could possibly go wrong? Absolutely everything, it turns out. The sheer panic I felt the first time night fell and I was being watched from every direction made my skin crawl, yet I am absolutely addicted to this game and its many monsters.



SUCKER FOR LOVE: FIRST DATE

dreadxp.com/sucker-for-love-first-dates

➔ I love a quirky dating sim, but *Sucker for Love: First Date* is much more than that. Your usual bachelors and bachelorettes are now eldritch horrors and you have to perform in-depth rituals to summon them. What happens next is down to your own actions. Just tread carefully.

TAIKO NO TATSUJIN:
RHYTHM FESTIVAL

en.bandainamcoent

➔ What's not to love about having the arcade in the palm of your hands. Even as someone who is notoriously terrible at rhythm games, I adore *Taiko* with my whole heart. It's got such an incredible selection of songs to play through as well.



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IT'S ALL OVER...

INTRODUCING BATTLEFIELD 6'S NEW CLASS

EDITOR

Unlockable by completing *Battlefield 6* in your birthday suit, the Editor is the secret new class that all PC gamers are going to want to avoid like the plague play. Armed with sausage rolls, pints of Guinness and the world's deadliest arse, the Editor is a specialist in turning the tide of battle.

Disclaimer: which way the tide turns is 100% not guaranteed.

ABILITIES



DISTRACTION

Enemy troops can't resist reading PCG magazine.



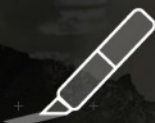
SUSTENANCE

Can dispense sausage rolls to heal wounded allies.



INEBRIATION

Armed with stout at all times. May affect aim.



REDACTION

The Editor's orders should ~~never, ever~~ be followed.



FLATULENCE

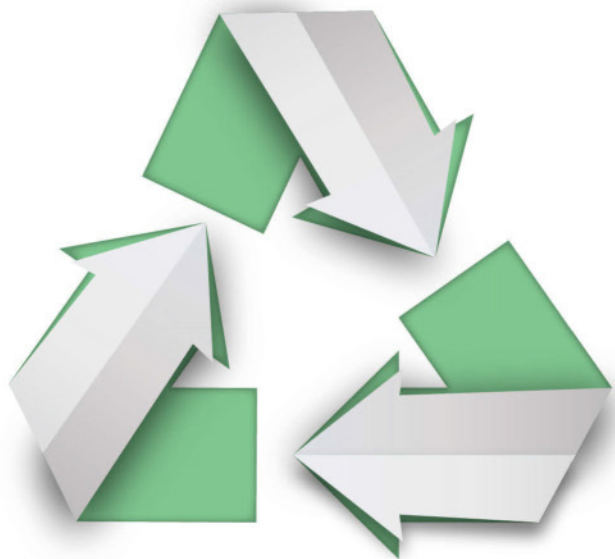
Perfect for gassing out a well-entrenched foe.



TRANSPORT

Drives the PCGmobile. It has go-faster stripes.

...UNTIL NOV 6



PAPER REVOLUTION

74% of paper and 83% of paper-based packaging is recycled
into new products; one of the highest recycling rates
of any material in Europe!

Sources: Confederation of European Paper Industries (CEPI), 2020 and Eurostat, 2018.
Europe: EU27 + Norway, Switzerland and the UK.



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